

**King of the
Labyrinth, Vol.
2**

Shien BIS

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Copyright

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MEIKYU NO OU Volume 2

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Chapter 11

The Defender of the Realm

1

Faster.

Faster!

Rising from the depths of the Sazardon Labyrinth, a place teeming with powerful monsters, Panzel ran as fast as his legs would carry him.

He all but flew up the tall staircases, as if exhaustion was a foreign concept. He moved with a speed that anyone well acquainted with the labyrinth would have thought impossible.

Bora's Sword increased its user's movement speed by 80 percent. It also increased energy, stamina, intellect, and all other stats by 60 percent. This item's blessing was what allowed Panzel to ascend the floors of the labyrinth with extreme haste. He was already a very skilled knight, but the blade's blessing had elevated him to superhuman levels.

He slipped safely past any monsters that tried to attack him. If one happened to block his path, he slashed through it effortlessly. In addition to the aforementioned benefits, Bora's Sword also tripled the user's attack power and increased their attack speed by 80 percent.

The base attack power of Bora's Sword was quite high, and Panzel already had the greatest physical strength and combat proficiency in the kingdom. Against all the blessings at his disposal, the monsters' high defense and agility meant nothing.

Furthermore, this divine sword also increased its user's critical-hit rate by 20 percent. A critical hit was a blow to an enemy's vital point, making the attack far deadlier than usual.

Panzel absorbed the stamina of the monsters he cut down, and any injuries he suffered were healed in a flash. This was thanks to the 10 percent-stamina absorption blessing granted by Bora's Sword, which not only relieved his exhaustion but also healed his injuries.

A blessing that granted 20 percent mana regeneration reinforced Panzel's high critical-thinking ability and fighting spirit, and even if

his sword was damaged, a blessing that automatically repaired it restored the blade to its sharpest condition.

There were many monsters in the labyrinth that possessed the ability to inflict poison or curses. This was where Kaldan's Dagger came in handy. The dagger was equipped with blessings that removed all status ailments and cured poison, and it also granted the holy element to its user.

On top of that, the dagger revealed the map of the current labyrinth floor to its bearer and doubled their intellect, allowing Panzel to sprint through the labyrinth despite being unfamiliar with its layout.

In other words, simply having the dagger at his hip caused the map of any floor he entered as well as the positions of all monsters on that level to appear in his mind, allowing him to instantly find the quickest, safest route.

Strange warrior... I have no words that can accurately convey my gratitude for these priceless treasures.

I'll return to you one day, and we'll settle things between us.

I'm sure that's what you're waiting for.

But right now...

Right now...

In order to save his lord and his benefactor from those who would threaten them...to protect them from the wicked ones that skulked within the shadows of the kingdom...Panzel had to return to the surface as quickly as possible.

2

Pan'ja Raban, the chief vassal of House Mercurius, and Panzel first met in the year 1079 of the Royal Calendar. By welcoming him into House Mercurius as a vassal, Pan'ja had opened Panzel's eyes to the world. Thereafter, Panzel demonstrated tremendous growth.

Julius, the young head of House Mercurius, had also shown remarkable growth. The king watched his progress from afar. Julius had been born of a secret marriage, and his mother was the king's beloved half-sister.

Once Panzel had finally become a knight, his achievements were many and varied. In turn, these victories were accredited to his lord, Julius, for such was the will of the king. This further grew the military prestige of House Mercurius. They remained a noble family without any territory. Their estate in the royal capital swelled in size, however, and their soldiers greatly increased in number.

Three years earlier, in the year 1076, Alkan, the Duke of Riga, had

made a declaration.

“Any person who singlehandedly defeats the monster that wiped out the Fourth Division of the Imperial Guard will be lauded as a hero on par with the founders of our kingdom.”

House Riga possessed power and wealth surpassing any house in the kingdom. Alkan was sixty years old that year, and he had been serving as the White Minister—the kingdom’s head of government—for thirty-one years. In the world of politics, he was a monster.

This declaration by House Riga greatly surprised the king, as they had also promised that if Panzel exterminated the minotaur, he would be named Defender of the Realm. Such a thing was unprecedented.

The appointment of the crown prince could not be put off any longer, and that was proving problematic for the kingdom.

The king wanted to make the first prince—the son of the first queen consort—the heir to the throne. Conversely, the Duke of Riga, who was the father of the second queen consort, wanted to make the second prince—his grandson—the heir. The Privy Council was leaning toward supporting Riga’s faction.

But Julius, who had a seat at the imperial court as the head of one of the noble families of counsel, had the following to say:

“It is an ancient tradition that the eldest son inherits the house. Does that not apply to the kingdom as well?” This comment altered the political landscape.

Julius gained a lot of support among the young nobility. Meanwhile, older nobles who knew him as the king’s nephew did not take his words lightly. He also made a convincing argument.

And so the case for the first prince to be named heir gained momentum.

The king deeply wished to promote Panzel to a high rank among the knights—high enough even to give him a seat at the imperial court.

The founders of the kingdom to whom the Duke of Riga was referring in his declaration were the twenty-four heroes who were named Defenders of the Realm after helping the founding king establish the kingdom. Each was appointed the first head of a noble house. Even one thousand years later, no one since had been granted this title.

If Panzel was named Defender of the Realm, he would obtain status equal to that of the noble families of counsel and would rise to the imperial court. That would mean the first prince would have a chance of being made the heir.

The one most opposed to Panzel earning a court seat was the Duke of Riga. For this reason, it made no sense for him to propose the possibility of Panzel being named Defender of the Realm, and it explained why the notion roused suspicion.

Even then, the king couldn't overlook that chance, so he strongly supported Riga's declaration. That was how it was decided that Panzel would face the minotaur.

The duel was scheduled for the day of the harvest festival because everyone would be out celebrating, meaning there would be no one in the labyrinth. Panzel wouldn't intrude on anyone's exploration, and there would be no one to interfere with the fight.

On the day of the harvest festival, Panzel was summoned to the palace and given the royal order to kill the minotaur, and he ventured to the labyrinth immediately afterward.

As if he had been waiting for Panzel's departure, Bolan Nadal, the Baron of Paulo at the time, sent his troops to House Mercurius. The army marched under both the banners of the Baron of Paulo and of Garrest, the eldest son of the Duke of Riga.

The head of House Nadal was one of the most powerful lords among the feudal states of Fenks. But in the year 1040, under the guidance of Molzora, the Duke of Riga at the time, the house was subjugated and made into a baron's house of Baldemost. The army advancing on House Mercurius was very powerful.

House Mercurius gathered their defenses and met the assault.

At the same time, a section of the Duke of Riga's forces surrounded the royal palace.

As House Mercurius was holding off the Baron of Paulo's fierce attack, Panzel made his return.

3

"I have returned, my lord."

"Panzel, you're back!"

"My deepest apologies for taking so long. Truthfully..."

And so Panzel reported to Julius and Pan'ja Raban, the former chief vassal of House Mercurius and the current commander of its forces, all that had transpired within the labyrinth. Panzel then asked if he could borrow Alestra's Bracelet from Julius.

"Of course. Here you go."

Panzel equipped Alestra's Bracelet and knelt in front of Julius.

"I await your orders to crush the enemy commander."

"You may go."

"Yes, my lord."

Proceeding alone, Panzel opened the gate, walked outside, passed through the magic barrier, and began to force his way through the enemy army. As he pressed forward, he cut down anyone who

approached him, slicing through their armor as if it were paper.

Though enemy soldiers were able to land clean hits on Panzel, he didn't appear to be taking any damage. He had Bora's Sword to thank for that. The blessings on most items obtained in labyrinths did not work in the outside world, but Bora's Sword was an exception.

Panzel headed directly for Pantram Square, where the invaders flew their two banners. Aiming for House Riga's banner, he hid himself among the enemy soldiers.

Not long after, he returned to the estate. No one attacked him this time—they just watched him go, paralyzed with fear. Panzel knelt in front of Julius again, this time presenting the head of the enemy commander, Garrest.

Then, under new orders from Julius, he led a host of soldiers to the royal palace, entered the service of the Imperial Guard's First Division leader, and thenceforth protected the palace and the first prince.

The Baron of Paulo fled the capital, the Duke of Riga claimed that he had dispatched his soldiers to protect the royal palace, and the disturbance came to an end.

This event came to be known as the Pantram Revolt.

4

Soon afterward, the Privy Council opened session.

Alkan claimed that the Baron of Paulo was the ringleader of the rebellion and that his eldest son, Garrest, was tricked into supporting it. He called what his son did an unforgivable crime, apologized to the king, and presented the heads of Garrest's children and close aides.

Many inquired about the guilt of House Riga, but Alkan handled that ingeniously. The truth would remain unclear until the Baron of Paulo was summoned and questioned, so the investigation had to be closed there.

Meanwhile, the king and many of his subjects were distracted by Panzel and Bora's Sword. When it came out that Panzel had received the blessed one-handed sword from the minotaur, people became obsessed with the blade.

Under royal decree, Panzel was made to fight one hundred knights from the Imperial Guard and then give Bora's Sword to the commander of the Imperial Guard's First Division and fight him. He won both fights, for the blessings of Bora's Sword did not work for anyone other than him.

Panzel was named Defender of the Realm, and he went on to establish House Goran. Alkan stepped down from his seat as White

Minister, and his second son, Draydol, ascended to the seat of Blue Minister. Out of the White, Red, Blue, and Black Ministers, blue was the third-highest ranking position.

An envoy was sent from the royal palace to the Baron of Paulo, Bolan Nadal, to request a cross-examination. The baron told the messenger he would answer with his sword.

That year, an army led by lords from Baldemost attacked the Paulo domain. The feudal states of Fenks didn't have a king; decisions were instead made through a conference of the various nobles. The knights in service of the lords of Fenks were called the Northern Knights. They were known for their heavy equipment and awe-inspiring strength, and no country had ever beaten them in a battle of equal numbers. Their might could not be understated.

The Paulo domain was not given to House Nadal by Baldemost. They owned the land originally. It consisted of a fertile plain surrounded on all sides by steep mountains, which made it extremely difficult to attack.

Bolan, the baron at the time, achieved glowing military victories in Baldemost in recent years, and until the emergence of Panzel, he was known as the greatest military commander in the kingdom.

Because the Paulo domain consisted of a stronghold built by nature, and because they were battling House Nadal's Northern Knights, everyone in Baldemost believed they were fighting an unwinnable war, which would end in a simple show of pride from the king. Even the lords who led the invasion were behaving as if their advance was just for show.

However, in a shocking turn of events, Panzel, one hundred Imperial Guard knights, and the two hundred House Mercurius soldiers who had been placed under his command broke through the natural stronghold and invaded the core of the Paulo domain. Panzel then took the Imperial Guardsmen and smashed a force of two hundred and fifty Northern Knights under the command of Bolan.

The Northern Knights were supposed to be impossible to defeat, even with overwhelming numbers. Panzel defeated them with a force half the size of his enemy's. This victory caused his fame to spread throughout the entire northern part of the continent.

Bolan enlisted the help of the influential Lord Banust and fled the country. Baldemost demanded Lord Banust hand over Bolan. However, Lord Banust insisted the Paulo domain be returned to Fenks, and so negotiations began.

The next year, 1097 of the Royal Calendar, Panzel married Esseluleia, and Julius joined the cabinet as the Black Minister. Draydol ascended to the seat of Red Minister.

In 1098, Julius was married. The revolt in the Paulo domain was

suppressed, and the region was renamed Keza. Keza was then given to Julius, who was named Marquis of Keza.

In year 1100 of the Royal Calendar, Panzel's oldest son, Arza, and Julius's oldest daughter, Serruria, were born. Pan'ja Raban passed away, and Draydol became the White Minister. The peace talks with Lord Banust were severed, and war broke out between Baldemost and fourteen lords from the feudal states of Fenks.

The war continued for just over three years.

Baldemost invaded with the crown prince serving as the supreme commander of their armies, and Panzel's godlike performance expanded their occupied territory in Fenks.

The Baron of Paulo fought Panzel several times and had the following to say about him:

“He is the god of thunder made flesh...”

From then on, the knights of Fenks came to call him Thunderstorm Panzel out of reverence.

Panzel defeated Lord Banust's Northern Knights multiple times despite their reputation as the strongest warriors in Fenks. He decapitated the Baron of Paulo, drove Lord Banust to suicide and captured his castle, and was one step away from gaining total dominion over the entire Banust domain.

Then in 1103, he died suddenly in military service. At first, the cause of death was unclear, but it was later determined that it was overuse of the divine sword's blessings.

A peace treaty was established through the efforts of Julius, and the Banust region became part of Baldemost. The occupied territory was given to House Goran, and Panzel was posthumously awarded the title of Marquis of Banust.

Thus, the life of Panzel the hero came to an end. He was thirty-one years old. His son Arza was raised by Julius, under whose care he learned to fight.

In year 1114 of the Royal Calendar, Arza turned fourteen, changed his name to Zara, became an adventurer, and took his first steps into the Sazardon Labyrinth. He leveled up at an astonishing rate, and after only a year and a half, he managed to reach the sixtieth floor of the labyrinth by himself. He then rose to level 65 and became an S-rank adventurer.

A new hero was being born.

Interlude 1

The minotaur was in an excellent mood.

In all its life in the labyrinth, it had never been so happy.

The reason was quite strange: The minotaur had just suffered the first defeat of its entire life.

It was not happy with the defeat itself, of course. Just thinking back on the unforgivable event made its blood boil, and its eyes seethed with fury.

However, it would be able to fight that man again. How could it not be excited by the prospect of renewed purpose? What greater joy was there?

I will win next time. I will defeat that powerful opponent. Victory will be mine. That is the goal I was born to achieve.

Such were the minotaur's thoughts.

For that reason, it also began to look forward to the arrival of enemies other than that man.

They didn't come as frequently as before, but they did appear every so often. The human adventurers who challenged him all wanted to be the ones to triumph over the King of the Labyrinth.

Truthfully, there were circumstances that brought them to the minotaur's lair—circumstances it had no way of knowing.

The year this minotaur was born in the Sazardon Labyrinth, left its boss room, and began to descend into its depths was the year 1079 of the Baldemost Royal Calendar. Two years later in 1081, it reached the bottom floor, defeated the metal dragon, and became the new ruler of the labyrinth.

A massive reward financed by the king was placed on the minotaur's head on two separate occasions, and for the next ten years until 1091, countless parties of adventurers challenged the minotaur, all ultimately becoming experience points that contributed to its growth. The year 1091 was when the minotaur wiped out the entire Fourth Division of the Imperial Guard.

The number of challengers decreased dramatically after that. That didn't mean they stopped coming, however. It just meant that those

who did show up were especially strong.

Rumors about the minotaur gradually spread to other countries.

They spread north to the feudal states of Fenks, which were fighting to protect their independence; to the eastern country of Daad; to the great country of Mazulu, known for its gifted magic practitioners; to the massive empire of Gorenza to the southwest; to the wealthy principality of Yenna; to the border province of Sheradan, known for its unforgiving terrain; to the Free Cities of Karelia; to the country of Peza and its many martial arts temples and swordsmanship training halls; to the eastern borderlands; to the western borderlands; to the savage tribes of the Jami Forest.

The rumors said there was an invincible monster on the bottom floor of the Sazardon Labyrinth. They also said that even parties of the highest-ranking adventurers could not leave a scratch on it and that it wiped out an entire division of the Imperial Guard.

There were people who laughed off the rumors as nonsense. Others ignored them as irrelevant to their daily lives. As the rumors continued to build over time, though, the existence of the great minotaur was gradually carved into the consciousness of the people.

The fact that the knight who nearly defeated the beast had acquired a sword blessed beyond compare and used its overwhelming power to elevate himself to the position of marquis further bolstered these tales.

This minotaur might have been the strongest monster in the history of the continent. Before anyone knew it, the minotaur began to be thought of as not just the master of the bottom floor of its own labyrinth but as the king of all labyrinths the world over.

There was also one more rumor: that the minotaur had a Bag, within which were all kinds of incredibly strong swords. It was said that whoever defeated the monster would receive a treasure trove of blessed weapons.

Parties consisting of powerful individuals who had conquered labyrinths in other regions began forming with the goal of defeating the Sazardon Labyrinth minotaur.

The one who managed to pull it off would be a hero, obtain unparalleled weapons, and earn incredible wealth. The promise of such lavish rewards brought strong opponents from all over the world to appear before the beast.

The challengers were not many, and they didn't appear all that frequently, either. Every so often, though, parties composed of the most distinguished adventurers the continent had to offer headed for the Sazardon Labyrinth.

The minotaur fought them all gleefully. In order to defeat that man, it needed to learn much more about the ways humans fought.

As it did battle with the adventurers, the minotaur would consider

what it would do if their attacks were ten times faster, ten times more powerful, and ten times sharper.

Those days of heart-racing excitement continued for some time.

Chapter 12

The Daughter of Gahra

1

“You need to go on a trip, boy,” Arza’s combat instructor, Logan, suddenly declared.

Arza was perplexed.

“To study the blade?”

“That is one reason for it. You need to sharpen your sword, your body, and your mind.”

“Won’t I get stronger just by making progress in the labyrinth?”

“You have it backward, boy. You’ll become too strong. You’re already too strong. I sent you into the labyrinth when you turned fourteen, but I never imagined you’d reach level sixty-five in only two years. You’re already an S-rank, too. Even Druga was astonished.”

Druga was Logan’s nephew and the current president of the Micaene Adventurers Guild. When Logan retired as president of the guild and moved into the Mercurius estate, his successor was the former manager Eador. Druga became the next guild president when Eador finally retired at age fifty-four.

After passing along his guild responsibilities, Eador became an officer of finance in the Banust domain, which was ruled by Arza’s mother. He was in charge of House Goran’s finances, and he was still in great health at sixty-two.

Speaking of age, Logan was the very picture of health at 105 years old. Very few people knew this, but Logan was a half-dwarf, and dwarves had longer life spans than humans. His nephew Druga was a pure-blooded dwarf. That was also a secret, of course, as people believed dwarves had gone extinct ages ago.

“I’ve heard that the Heavenly Blade Percival reached S-rank when he was fifteen.”

Percival was a former head of House Mercurius who’d died in the Sazardon Labyrinth. His godlike swordsmanship had earned him the nickname Heavenly Blade.

“He became an adventurer at age twelve. He only reached that point

after four years of hard work. Try not to change the subject. Though now that you've brought up the Heavenly Blade, I'll say this: He did not start out by holing himself up in the labyrinth. He went on many adventures in the outside world as well. Actually, he became an S-rank adventurer directly after his overwhelming subjugation of the Zoahard mountain bandits."

"I know. He defeated the eight leaders including the chief all by himself, or something like that."

"That job was a request from the country, and a certain noble from a well-to-do family was placed in command. He was apparently a knight of some skill, but he lacked real combat experience. Mountain bandits are typically exterminated after being lured into a trap on level ground, but this knight decided to attack the bandits' hideout directly. Well, I won't say that can't be an effective method, too. It wouldn't be so bad if you could manage to wipe them all out at once, after all. Still, if you are going to do it that way, you should send an advance scout, move covertly to hide the nature of your forces, then break them up into squadrons and surround the enemy hideout. There are a number of ways to do it effectively."

"I understand that. Is that not what he did?"

"Not in the slightest. He marched up to the hideout in broad daylight with everyone together, making a right racket all the while."

"Did he not order everyone to be quiet?"

"He may have, but the apprentice knights, who were just looking for some combat practice, and the other people tagging along under his command probably wouldn't have listened to him. Traveling along a narrow mountain road with a great number of people causes your formation to stretch very long, which makes it difficult to control everyone. If he ordered them to be quiet, he probably gave the order at a certain location rather than telling them to be quiet over and over again for hours. Regardless, they arrived at the hideout. Attacking the bandits all at once after casting support magic should have worked."

"But the bandits were ready for them?"

"That's right. The bandits had set a trap. They were probably keeping careful watch. There's a chance the bandits might have bribed a government official for information. Regardless, the subjugation force that was supposed to surround the hideout and lay siege to it ended up being surrounded themselves. The bandits rained down a storm of bullets and magic, inflicting heavy damage. Something good came out of all that, however. The force's system of command was thrown into chaos, and it became impossible to relay any orders."

"That was a good thing?"

"Yes. It was a good thing because the adventurers were freed up to make their own decisions. Those who joined the expedition as a party

quickly met up with their comrades, and everyone else was able to tighten into smaller groups as well. With each group acting individually, they avoided the bandits' attacks, circled around, and managed to turn the tide of battle."

"Even Lord Percival?"

"No. The Heavenly Blade was near the commander, who was an acquaintance of his father. During the march, he realized the Heavenly Blade was the son of House Mercurius and invited him to stay by his side. I doubt they talked much, though."

"Why is that?"

"Oh-ho. 'Why?' he asks. That's right, you never knew the Heavenly Blade. He was not an easy person to hold a conversation with. Most people probably never heard anything from him beyond the typical 'yep,' 'nope,' and 'huh.' Whenever someone said anything he deemed boring, he wouldn't even respond. And he was a very fast walker, so before anyone could manage to strike up a conversation, he would already be long gone."

"I have heard he was quiet. But you talked with him often, right, Uncle?"

"That's right. Strangely enough, he would talk to me. Getting back to the story, though—he was next to the commander. At first, the commander was planning to have the sorcerers launch a unified magical attack, and then he would send everyone charging into the hideout. However, just before the attack, a magical barrier was erected over the whole building. The bandits were prepared for them in every way. I heard the defensive magic was quite strong and that no magic attacks could penetrate it. The commander assumed the bandits wouldn't be able to hold such powerful magic for very long, so he ordered the sorcerers to keep bombarding it with spells."

"Huh. That doesn't sound like a bad order."

"Yes, tactically, it was the correct decision. He also had the shield-bearing knights protect the sorcerers from arrows. Suffice to say, he wasn't a complete idiot. However, allies were falling left and right. That's when the Heavenly Blade took action."

"Did he act without orders from the commander?"

"It would be more accurate to say his intuition told him what the commander wanted. He knew they needed to dispatch the enemies within the hideout. When Percival arrived at the magic barrier, he equipped Alestra's Bracelet and passed directly through it. The enemy must have been shocked. He was immediately targeted by arrows and spells inside the building, but he dodged every single one."

"He dodged the spells?"

"That's right. I didn't see it myself, but I've heard it from eyewitnesses. The Heavenly Blade did often tell me he was capable of

dodging arrows and spells.”

“...! He could even dodge arrows...”

“No, don’t make that face yet. Here comes the good part. Even though the Heavenly Blade was wearing Alestra’s Bracelet, he hardly needed it. He didn’t even use it to absorb magic. The moment he entered the building he cut down eight men. They were the only eight people in the building, and they turned out to be the bandit leaders. The chief, Zoahard, was among them. Zoahard was formerly an S-rank adventurer, but the Heavenly Blade apparently entered the building and cut his throat in the blink of an eye. Once Zoahard was dead, most of the bandits stopped resisting.”

“Hmm, that’s amazing.”

“The Heavenly Blade’s level at that time was lower than yours is now. But can you do the same thing he did?”

“No, I don’t have Lord Percival’s skill.”

“You do have the skill. You’ve been receiving instruction from some of the greatest swordsmen of the present era since you were small. I may not be so elegant, but I’ve also had more than my fair share of combat experience. If we’re talking strictly about skill, you’re not inferior to the Heavenly Blade. However...”

“What is it?”

“You don’t yet know battle outside of the labyrinth.”

“True.”

“Battle in the outside world is completely different from battle within labyrinths. You can’t use potions. If you lose an arm or a leg in the outside world, it won’t grow back. Even if you lose your right arm and then enter a labyrinth and drink a red potion, it won’t regrow. To the labyrinth, not having a right arm will be your original condition. Not even the changes your body experiences after a level-up will bring back extremities that you lost in the outside world. There are medicines and healing charms that work outside of labyrinths, but the most they’ll do is accelerate self-healing. Well, you’ll occasionally encounter a priest or monk whose abilities will make them seem like a miracle worker, but even they can’t restore lost limbs.”

“I know.”

“It’s the same with mana. As long as you keep chugging blue potions, you can use your magic and skills as much as you want. But that won’t work in the outside world. You need to be careful about how you manage your mana, and you can’t fight nonstop like you can in labyrinths. If you run out of physical and mental energy, you’ll be finished. Running out of stamina in the middle of a fight will be the death of you.”

“Yes, I promise I’m aware of that. I’m being mindful in my training.”

“I suppose you are. However, you’ve gotten too strong. If you

continue down your current path, you will not learn fear.”

“The monsters in the labyrinth are plenty scary. And I always go alone, so I do feel fear.”

“Sure. But the thing is, no matter how strong an enemy is, all you have to do is keep chugging potions, and you’ll defeat them eventually. Killing enemies also increases your level, and a higher level means you’ll be able to easily take down enemies that struck fear in your heart before. Labyrinths are a drug. There’s no limit to how strong you can grow, and the rewards only get better the deeper you go. The more you venture into labyrinths, the harder it gets to keep yourself away. You do feel fear, but that only adds to the thrill. You feel real pain and stress as well, but you have nothing to worry about, because any problem can be fixed by working hard and increasing your level. Once that way of thinking becomes ingrained in your mind, you won’t be able to fight in the outside world.”

“My battle is in the labyrinth.”

When Arza’s father, Panzel, was posthumously given the rank of marquis for his achievements in life and the Banust domain was granted to House Goran, House Riga, to which Arza’s mother belonged, was thrilled. Esseluleia’s older brother Draydol, who was the current Duke of Riga, attempted to send prominent vassals to the Banust domain in order to have Arza raised in House Riga. He tried to appoint someone from that house to serve as the Marquis of Banust until Arza came of age. He was hijacking the position in the name of support.

Esseluleia appealed directly to the king. Her husband, Panzel, had made a promise to the minotaur in the labyrinth: that he would return to finish their duel. His son, Arza, had to be the one to keep that promise. She wanted Arza to be raised in House Mercurius, which was famed for its military prowess, and asked for him to be given the title of Marquis of Banust after he grew up and slayed the minotaur. She asked for permission to serve as the marquis until that point. That was her plea to the king.

It was highly unusual for a woman to be entrusted rule over such an important and sizable region, but the king granted her permission. That was why Arza needed to become strong enough to defeat the minotaur, no matter what it took.

“That’s right. However, as you are now, you wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“Is there something I am missing?”

“It might be the pain that all humans experience. The Heavenly Blade knew that pain. Your father also knew it well. I can’t imagine he didn’t.”

“Are you saying I need to understand how precious and fragile a life

is?”

“That’s right. That’s one way to phrase it. However, I don’t think you’re capable of understanding that as you are now. Once you defeat that monster, you will have to fight in the outside world. You need some more perspective. Go on a trip. You still have time.”

“If that is what you want, Uncle, I will do it. Where should I go?”

“It doesn’t matter. That said, we can’t have anyone in Baldemost learning of your true identity. That would be problematic. That goes double for Fenks. Which leaves the south, I guess. Travel far and experience all you can.”

“Understood. I will go south.”

“Make sure to have lots of battles down there. Your movement will be restricted even in the south, though, if your identity is discovered. The adventurer medal I had made under the name of Zara was partially for this purpose. That trick wouldn’t have been possible if Druga hadn’t been the guild president and the person handling your family registry wasn’t a subordinate of Eador.”

Arza’s holy occupation was knight. Even knights could have an adventurer medal issued at a temple, but his true name would have been given away as soon as his medal was inspected. If the name “Arza Goran” were to get out, he wouldn’t be able to move nearly as comfortably, and rumors would spread like wildfire.

For that reason, they changed his name to “Zara.” They did not report that to the royal palace, however. Normally, nobles of above-average rank had to file a report when they changed their names. The contents of the report were then entered into the Family Lineage Registry. But because it would be a blemish on their registry to record that he’d changed his name to Zara—with no family name—they were holding off on the report. He would, of course, eventually use the name Arza Goran again. His adventurer medal was issued at the temple affiliated with the guild, and thanks to the authority of Druga, he was able to discreetly perform activities such as buying consumables and information about the labyrinth and acquiring lost items.

“I hope I can raise my level at least a little.”

“No, I don’t think that will happen. It’s a lot harder to level up in the outside world. It’ll be even harder for you since your level is so high already. I’m not positive you would level up even if you spent a year fighting in the outside world. But you shouldn’t be thinking about that. You can always come back here and train if you find you’re not strong enough.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Fight well and fight often. Encounter a wide variety of people and places. Have many fruitful experiences. By doing all that, you will

come to know this world. Journeys are a great way to learn about yourself as well. Admittedly, I'm parroting all this from an old friend. Ah, one more thing. Make sure not to open your Treasury in front of people."

"Okay, I understand."

People who went on adventures usually took up the holy occupation of adventurer. The adventurer job awarded a storage system called a Bag. Bags were extremely easy to use. The holy occupation of knight, on the other hand, awarded you a storage system called a Treasury. It was possible to share a Treasury with other people and set it up for inheritance.

Because you took items out of Bags simply by reaching inside the magical space and grabbing the item you wanted, people could not see inside them. However, Treasuries worked by displaying an operation screen from which you would choose the item you wanted. For that reason, using them in front of others would immediately give away that you had one. Depending on where people were standing, they would even be able to read your screen. Anyone who saw Arza's would immediately realize the size of his Treasury.

"Don't just pull your sword out of your Treasury whenever you need it. Wear it on your hip at all times. Put items you use often in a rucksack and carry it around. Don't rely on your Treasury. This will both serve as good training for you and make people think you're a novice adventurer with a low-capacity Bag."

2

"Are you...awake?"

The clear voice cut through his hazy consciousness. Zara thought it sounded like a girl's.

A fire was crackling. He was in some kind of cabin.

He could see the fire, which meant he was awake, but Zara couldn't remember when he had opened his eyes. Actually, he couldn't remember when he'd lost consciousness in the first place.

He felt like he was inside a very nostalgic dream.

Zara once again drifted off to sleep.

3

"Your luck good. If you fall in snow, you die."

Zara had collapsed in the snow. Just before he had frozen to death, he had been saved by this girl.

He thought he had been fully prepared for the extreme volatility of the weather here. He did not mean to underestimate the Gahra Mountains, which were commonly referred to as the Mountains of Death. He definitely hadn't expected a blizzard to suddenly hit the foot of the mountain, though, when he could see spring buds blooming all around him.

Zara lifted himself out of bed and ate the soup the girl gave him. The soup contained salted, dried meat; roasted pieces of tree root; and potatoes. He could feel his cells absorbing the nourishment.

"That was delicious. Thank you," he said, setting his bowl aside.

The girl nodded without smiling, collected her and Zara's bowls, and washed them using a bucket full of snow.

"You have name?"

"I'm Zara."

The girl had been expressionless until then, but she looked at the boy in surprise and then burst out laughing.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You get name from blizzard?"

Zara stared at the girl blankly. She made a slightly troubled face.

"You not know legend of Zara, Bora, and Gahra?"

"No."

And so the girl told him a story.

4

Once, there was a god named Zara. He had two younger sisters named Bora and Gahra, and the three of them got along very well. They lived together for a long time, protecting the earth and bestowing blessings upon the people.

In time, Bora fell in love with Zara, and the two were joined in marriage. They had a daughter.

But afterward, Bora noticed something: Gahra had also fallen in love with Zara. So Bora took their daughter and fled. Gahra did not believe she could be happy without a love of her own, so she hid herself away.

Having lost his two sisters and his child, Zara was devastated. He became the wind in the sky and embarked on a journey to find his sisters and his daughter. With their gods gone and their blessings lost, the people entered an era of suffering.

The people searched for the gods. Bora had torn up the earth and was living underground. Gahra had hidden herself in the mountains.

Nobody knew where Zara was.

The people of the plains worshipped Bora, and the people of the mountains worshipped Gahra. No one worshipped Zara. Bora and Gahra granted abundant harvests to the plains and the mountains, respectively.

But to this day, Bora and Gahra still lament being separated from Zara. That's why when people get too close to these gods, they die.

5

Zara had never heard that legend before. He knew of Bora, of course, but he had never heard of gods named Zara or Gahra.

The Gahra Mountains must be named after that goddess.

He felt a little embarrassed that he had coincidentally chosen Zara as the name he would adopt as an adventurer. His choice had nothing to do with myth or legend; he'd simply picked it because it was a play on his real name.

"What's your name?"

"I not have name yet. Called daughter of Gerie."

That meant her father's name was Gerie. Her answer made it clear that she was from Zolzoga.

You should never put your faith in rumors.

As the people of the plains knew them, the people of the mountains—or the people of Zolzoga—were more half-beast than human. They were covered in hair all over their bodies and were only capable of broken speech. They lived in the mountains and never went down to the plains.

They thought and lived like beasts. They were knowledgeable of the mountains and traded valuable goods like monster fur, medicine, and minerals in exchange for wares from the plains. Children were not named by their parents but instead named themselves when they deemed it necessary.

The girl in front of Zara looked nothing like a beast, though.

Her clothes were made of tanned animal hides, and she wasn't wearing makeup. Her hair was cut short. Her face, hands, and feet were covered in sweat and dust.

Even then, he thought she was beautiful. The way she moved was both lively and graceful at the same time. Her speech was awkward, but her choice of words and manner of speech made it clear she was very intelligent.

Her voice and her eyes had the greatest impact on him. She sounded dignified without forcing it. Her gaze was free of arrogance, and

whenever their eyes met, he could feel her stare penetrating his very core.

He looked to his side and saw his sword and rucksack. It should have been hard enough to carry his unconscious body out of the blizzard. He hadn't expected her to bring his belongings as well.

The fact that she grabbed my sword and rucksack proves her kindhearted nature.

"Do you live here alone?"

The girl answered that her father had died three months ago and she had moved into this cabin that her father owned because she could no longer stay in the village. The girl's mother was from the plains, so she'd learned the language of the plains from her.

Zara was about to inquire after her mother but then felt a presence outside.

6

After seeing the boy notice something and pick up his sword, the girl ran to a wall of the cabin. She opened a window and looked outside.

The violent snow from earlier had stopped, and soft rays of sunlight characteristic of spring were illuminating the peak of the mountain.

The girl stared intently at the forest. She then closed the window and hastily picked up a bow and quiver, tension plain on her face.

The boy had already pulled on his boots and was headed for the door.

"No!" screamed the girl, but Zara ignored her and rushed outside.

It was an ettin.

Also called snow ogres, ettins were monsters that only lived in high elevation on snowy mountains and would grow violent and attack as soon as they smelled a human.

They were covered in long white fur all over their body and face. They didn't have any special skills but were very strong and resilient against physical and magical attacks. Humanoid and bipedal, they were over twice as tall as humans and had extremely long, thick arms. Ettins were thought to be around the monster level of 50, and A-rank adventurers would only fight one with a party.

The ettin was about thirty meters away. The blizzard had stopped, but the snow on the ground should have still made it difficult to walk. Despite that, the boy used his nimble speed to run on top of the snow. Watching from the door, the girl's eyes widened in surprise.

The snow wasn't that deep, but it was fresh and soft. Running fast enough to land on top of fresh snow was something not even the

people of the mountains were capable of.

Zara reached the ettin but did not attack it right away. The creature swung its right arm with a *whoosh*. That attack had enough force behind it to either seriously injure or kill even an A-rank adventurer, but the boy ducked and avoided it.

The monster attacked with its left arm next, lifting it high and slamming it down violently. Carefully watching the movement of the ettin's hands, nails, and the rest of its body, Zara dodged quickly to the left just before the attack could hit him. The monster's swing caught only air, and a massive amount of snow was kicked up when its arm hit the ground.

With its left hand still in the snow, it pulled itself forward and then swung its right hand down diagonally.

From a distance, the ettin's expression seemed to indicate that it was enjoying itself, but up close, nothing could be further from the truth. Even the bravest adventurers would be intimidated by such a sneer.

But the boy stayed completely calm.

The people of the plains call them snow ogres, but they have horns, and the structures of their faces don't match ogres', either. I wonder if this creature belongs to a different classification of monster altogether.

Those are the kind of idle thoughts speeding through Zara's mind.

When the monster shifted its center of gravity to its left arm, the boy bent down and swung his sword with his right hand. He severed the ettin's left arm, and it came crashing to the ground.

Zara lunged to the right and decapitated the ettin with a single stroke. Warm blood erupted from the monster's neck and left arm, and it collapsed into the white snow, painting it red. The boy landed across from it, avoiding the blood spray entirely.

Still holding her bow and quiver, the girl stood in the doorway dumbfounded by what she had just witnessed.

Seems my mind and body weren't sluggish at all. My movement was the same as ever.

Zara reflected on the battle while studying the monster's corpse.

7

The girl began skinning the ettin and harvesting its meat. Zara talked to her as he helped.

"I want to cross the mountain and pass through the Great Ravine. Can you please tell me the way?"

"I not know how to say. Lots of snow up mountain. Blizzard coming. Very rough for many days."

The girl pointed to herself.

“We go together. You help with hunt.”

The girl was saying she would guide him to the ravine and that she wanted him to assist with hunting. Zara had planned on crossing the mountain on his own, but at this point, he understood that wouldn't be training. It would be suicide.

“Thank you. We'll go together, then.”

This was the first time he had ever skinned a beast, but as he lifted the heavy limbs, rotated the body, and washed the fat with snow, he felt like he was being decently helpful. He knew monsters in the outside world didn't vanish after death, but he didn't know they were this warm on the inside. The ettin's flesh actually felt hot.

“Can you sell skins? Or do you use them yourself?”

“Can sell. Ettin is rare. Good that no injury. This sell for high price. This very good. It big, warm, soft. You killed, so you keep.”

“I want to give it to you, but would that be rude?”

The girl's hands stopped moving for a moment, and she spoke in a subdued voice.

“Man give woman big pelt...have meaning of sleep together. Do not say that.”

He wasn't expecting that kind of response at all, so it took a bit for him to understand what she meant.

Aaaahh, okay! So I would be proposing.

“Okay, then please take this pelt and sell it yourself. I want you to have the money as thanks for helping me out.”

The girl didn't respond at first, but after a short while, she gave a small nod without looking at him.

After that, they continued their work in silence. The girl didn't speak, didn't make any facial expressions, and didn't give any orders. Zara taught himself how to help by observing her actions.

Once he got a good enough handle on what they were doing, he did most of the knife work. He had no idea skinning was this difficult. By the time they finished, he felt excruciating pain in his shoulders, back, hips, and more. Given how muscular he was, the task shouldn't have been excessively burdensome, but he had apparently overexerted himself.

He watched as the girl massaged the skin with grass juice.

That night he rubbed some medicinal herbs on his body before he went to sleep.

The daughter of Gerie had a Tirika Bow.

This blessed item was made up of the bow, arrows, and quiver collectively and was typically dropped on or around the twentieth floor of the Sazardon Labyrinth. The quiver held eleven arrows, and once the user had exhausted them all, it would magically replenish itself after a certain amount of time had passed.

Arrows fired from the bow disappeared. They couldn't be used with other bows, but the bow could fire other arrows. Conveniently, the bowstring did not make a sound when firing. Most blessed items dropped from monsters weren't helpful outside of labyrinths, but Tirika Bows were an exception.

It was a difficult item to obtain outside of labyrinths, and as it was a relatively rare drop, it would fetch a pretty hefty price whenever there was one for sale. There was no doubt that this was a valuable item to the people of the mountains, as they didn't have much in the way of plains currency.

This Tirika Bow was a memento of the girl's father, but when he'd died, some men from the village had asked her to sell it to them. The girl refused, saying it was her job to pass down her father's techniques.

I have plenty of bows and arrows in my Treasury.

Zara opened his Treasury and searched for bows and arrows. The Treasury he'd inherited from Panzel was enormous and full of rare and powerful items. It contained many varieties of blessed bows as well. There was even a Tirika Bow.

"Ah, I have one, too."

He took out the bow and showed it to the girl. He thought she would be happy to see he had the same weapon she did, but for some reason, her expression stiffened. She looked away quickly, not saying anything for a while.

When she finally spoke again, her voice was thick with resolve.

"I teach you how to use bow!"

9

"Ya, ya, ya!"

The girl was running and shouting in a high-pitched voice, driving the three red deer they were hunting toward the rock Zara was hiding behind. Zara readied his Tirika Bow in his left hand and nocked an arrow with his right. He was holding three more arrows at the ready.

He fired without making a sound, and the arrow pierced the neck of the red deer in front. Without delay, he fired the second and third

arrows, accurately piercing the necks of the remaining two deer. He didn't need to use the spare arrow.

Okay. I'm getting used to this rapid-fire method.

He gave himself a passing grade.

When the girl first told him about this technique, he'd tilted his head in confusion. He had always been taught by his bow instructor to remove arrows from the quiver one at a time.

The people of the mountains, however, used them differently. According to his companion, it was considered wasteful to break your posture after hitting your target, so it was best to pull multiple arrows from the quiver at once.

Zara's shots all pierced vital points.

The girl approached the red deer and slit their throats with her dagger. She was careful to ensure their pelts wouldn't be dirtied with blood. Once she finished draining the three carcasses, she cut open the abdomen of one of them and started gorging herself on its entrails.

Now that was something the boy couldn't follow her example on.

Next, they skinned the deer and butchered the flesh. They were probably going to smoke some of the meat later. They also stored some of it raw in order to eventually roast it or use it in stew.

The girl had a Cargo, which was the storage system possessed by merchants. It could store especially large items, and in addition to the convenience of being able to sort items by classification, it had the special characteristic of being able to preserve perishable foods for long periods of time.

That didn't mean her holy occupation was merchant, however. She was actually a hunter. Zara found it a little weird that a hunter had a Cargo, but that was apparently common in her tribe.

She put the red deer skins in her Cargo to be tanned later.

10

As he was guided through the mountain range named after a goddess, Zara learned plenty from the daughter of Gerie, besides her technique with a bow.

He learned how to hunt, how to find medicinal herbs and edible plants, how to tan animal hides, how to get accustomed to high altitudes, and how to live in the snow.

Zara returned the favor by offering her ingredients he happened to have in his Treasury and by making food from the plains. Her reaction when he had her try some sugar candies with fragrant powder sprinkled on top was perfect. She looked like she would melt into a

puddle of ecstasy. From then on, her eyes lit up every time Zara offered her sweets. She reminded him of an adorable woodland critter in those moments.

I guess the rumor about them being animalistic was accurate, in a way.

He leaped at every opportunity to ask about her village, her family, and how the people of the mountains lived. The girl, on the other hand, didn't ask a single thing about who he was or what he was trying to do.

Crossing the mountains like this was not something any sane person would attempt.

If you wanted to go from Baldemost Kingdom to the southern countries, it was best to travel along Bera Road and go to Mazulu. If you took the North Elga Highway north of Mazulu, you would pass along the bank of the scenic Dona Lake and end up in the southwestern part of the continent. Bera Road was a highway built on the western edge of the Gahra Mountains and could have been considered the only bridge between the north and south. It was traversable any time of year except for the dead of winter.

If you were embarking on a pilgrimage to the Holy Kingdom of Roahl to the southeast, you could cross through the Principality of Yenna, which bordered Mazulu to the south, and travel along the South Elga Highway.

Baldemost and Mazulu each had checkpoints on the border that required pricey tolls to pass through, but because they were patrolled by guards, they were relatively safe.

If you had business in the east and Bera Road was too much of a detour, you could circumvent the Gahra Mountains by traveling through the borderlands. Large expanses of that region had nothing resembling a road, and the risk of encountering monsters or thieves was high. Still, it was safer and faster than the alternative.

Even among the mountainfolk, very few tribes lived in the Gahra Mountains. Most were nomadic and traveled across the southern mountainous region, which was known as the bosom of the Zolzoga people.

Anyone attempting to cross through the Gahra Mountains either didn't want to pass through the checkpoint or were criminals trying to shake off pursuers. Zara would have understood if the girl suspected him of belonging to either category.

remained on the ground year-round, then walked for twenty more days through a section of the mountain with intense snowfall.

They were covering their faces with items called gaugaro masks. These were made of tree bark and were intended to protect the wearer's skin against the elements. Zara could see and breathe through the gaps in the mask just fine, but he couldn't get used to how prickly it was.

They did a lot of hunting. The girl insisted on dividing the pelts evenly between the two of them. She said even half of them would give her more than enough money to build a whole new cabin and completely replace all her furniture.

They slept with their backs touching to keep warm at night.

The next day, they would be traversing the most dangerous part of the mountain. As he drifted off to sleep, Zara reflected on something that had happened a few days earlier.

They had found a couple of quartet birds. The quartet bird was given its name because it could look like four different creatures, depending on the angle from which you viewed it. Its meat was rumored to extend your life span, so it sold for a lot.

They'd managed to capture the two birds, but their cries and the scent of their blood had attracted some ice wolves.

Ice wolves were roughly the same level as gray wolves, which put them around level 10. Unlike in the labyrinth, however, monsters in the outside world grew and learned, making them significantly more dangerous. Despite that, Zara could handle dozens of ice wolves no problem.

He'd actually sensed them coming and cut down three of the four the moment they leaped at them. As he was about to slice the throat of the fourth, he sensed more wolves approaching thanks to his Detection skill. Another pack happened to be in the area, and they'd started moving toward the travelers after smelling the blood.

I can't let them surround us.

The moment the thought had occurred to Zara, his right arm froze up, and he only managed to give the wolf a light scratch. Without delay, he'd struck the side of the beast's face with his left hand and then dodged a snap of its jaws, but then he'd started shaking as if afflicted by some kind of curse. He was having difficulty moving and thinking.

The effect had been brief, and with the girl's help, he'd managed to repel the wolves. As he drifted off to sleep, though, he couldn't help wondering what that feeling had been.

No. I know what that was.

It was fear.

When he'd entered the Sazardon Labyrinth for the first time at age

fourteen, Zara had reached the staircase of the fourteenth floor. His training up to that point had made that feat more than possible.

On the way back to the surface, he'd caught sight of a party being attacked by a pack of wolves near the tenth-floor stairwell. Zara had ran up to help them, and while protecting the injured adventurers, he'd ended up getting three fingers bitten off. He'd immediately healed the injury with a potion and then finished off the wolves. He considered that moment a learning experience and had assumed he would forget it. After finding himself in a similar situation, though, the event returned to his mind.

As individuals, the ice wolves stood no chance against him. He wouldn't have even taken much damage had they managed to get a few bites in.

However, being assailed by a large number of wolves simultaneously made dodging all their attacks difficult. When fighting outside of the labyrinth, you also had to deal with accumulating injuries, and you could end up with a serious wound that couldn't be healed.

Zara had a goal. He had a mission he needed to complete. He could not die until he did so. He could not lose a hand or an arm. That was why he'd felt fear when fighting the ice wolves.

Zara had no idea what to do about his newfound feeling.

12

"Now we go onto sacred ground."

It had been two days since she said that.

On the sacred ground you were not allowed to spill blood. You had to do your best to avoid monsters, and if you did happen to run into one, you had to distract it and flee. Meat drained of blood was used traditionally as a decoy, and the girl had prepared a large amount of it.

The daughter of Gerie said they would spend that entire day passing through this dangerous section, then descend through a calm and gentle stretch, eventually reaching the ravine in a week. Zara couldn't imagine this area would be as difficult as what they had passed through to get there. The girl, however, appeared very nervous and was looking around carefully as they advanced through the mountain.

I'd like to take a break soon and eat something...

As soon as Zara thought that, he heard something in the distance.

In the mountains, it was difficult to pinpoint the source of a noise. In spite of that, he turned toward the direction from which he thought

the sound had come and looked down the slope. There, he spotted seven people cornered by ice wolves on the edge of a cliff that towered over a ravine.

The weather was clear, allowing for good visibility. There were four people wearing clothes that suggested they were from the plains. Two of them were small—probably children.

Judging by the clothes of the other three, they were likely from the mountains. The trio were wearing gaugaro masks.

One of the people from the plains had a cloth wrapped around his face.

They were being attacked by twelve wolves. Four of the beasts were already dying on top of the snow. Zara could tell at a glance that the party didn't need saving.

The person from the plains with the cloth wrapped around his face was overwhelmingly strong. He had a large frame and swung his broad sword around with ease as he bisected any wolves that approached him.

The three from the mountains were also dispatching the wolves easily. The one protecting the children was a sorcerer, who would occasionally shoot down the animals with fireballs.

The pure-white snow was stained red with the blood of the dying wolves.

"This not good. Must leave now," the girl said, tugging at Zara's sleeve with a tense expression on her face. This was around the time the last wolf was defeated. Zara was about to do as the girl said when something odd appeared.

A strange, pure-white monster rose out of the snow. It looked a bit like a child wearing a snug-fitting white cloth over its entire body. Its hands, feet, eyes, mouth, nose, and more were nowhere to be found, and its entire body was trembling.

More of the strange creatures rose out of the snow until there were ten in all. They surrounded the people, their bodies writhing as they moved unsteadily toward them.

The three people of the mountains bellowed a command, and the entire group ran away from the faceless ghosts. A few of the monsters dove into the snow and disappeared. A moment later, the same number reemerged to block the party's path.

The mountainfolk drew their respective weapons and began attacking the faceless ghosts. No amount of cutting or slashing seemed to do any damage, however, instead only sprayed something resembling snow into the air.

The warrior with the large sword slashed at a faceless ghost chasing him. This time, he succeeded in cutting off its head, and he sliced the rest of its body to pieces. It stopped moving for a bit, but then its body

began to shake, and the monster quickly reconstituted itself.

Before long, the ten faceless ghosts had completely surrounded the seven people. The cliff was to their backs. It was so steep that the ground below wasn't visible.

A red hole opened wide on the torso of each of the faceless ghosts.

Are those...mouths?

The faceless ghosts threw wide their crimson maws and began biting their prey.

In no time at all, the party was covered in bloody wounds.

The two adults among the plainsfolk were doing everything they could to protect the children, but because the faceless ghosts were capable of stretching their bodies, it was very difficult to completely defend against their snapping.

One of the mountain men thrust his dagger into a faceless ghost's mouth. Blue sparks began flying from the monster, and then it burst into snow and disappeared.

The nine remaining faceless ghosts immediately stopped moving. They then shrunk their stretched bodies and shook violently. More sparks began racing across their incorporeal frames, and they simultaneously fired bolts of lightning at the man who had killed one of them. With a sound like a large tree snapping in two, the mountain man's flesh was charred black, and he collapsed.

Zara opened his Treasury, performed a search, and pulled out a sword. It was one with which he was especially comfortable. He put away the cane he had been using as a walking support and then retrieved and equipped a bracelet.

"No! Bad if kill! Those foster child of Gahra. If kill, make Gahra mad. No! Do not go!"

"Wait there."

Zara ignored his guide and ran down the slope. Before long, the other two mountainfolk were dead. The three corpses lay cold in the snow.

Eight of the faceless ghosts remained.

The warrior with the large sword was a man, and the sorcerer was a woman. The children were a boy and a girl. They were probably a family.

The children were covered in blood, having been bitten all over by the faceless ghosts. The wounds of the woman protecting the children were even deeper.

One of the creatures opened its mouth wide and tried to chomp down on the boy's head. The man stabbed his sword into the faceless ghost's mouth and killed it. The remaining seven stopped moving, began to shake, and simultaneously fired lightning bolts at the warrior.

The man was hit with an explosive blast, sparks flying everywhere. He smelled of cooked meat, but it didn't look like he had suffered a lethal wound. He probably had equipment to defend against magic.

The cloth around his face, however, was blown off, and his hood was thrown back as well. His head was hairless and decorated in strange tattoos. There was something carved below his eyes as well.

He's a gladiator from the Gorenza Empire.

Zara finally arrived on the scene, drew his sword, and set about slashing at the faceless ghosts surrounding the woman and children. However, his targets didn't pay him any mind.

One of the faceless ghosts tried to bite the gladiator, so Zara quickly thrust his sword into the monster's mouth and killed it.

The remaining six faceless ghosts fired lightning bolts at Zara. He held up the bracelet on his left hand and negated the blasts. Alestra's Bracelet was a treasure that protected against magical attacks.

The faceless ghosts fired lightning bolts at him again, but the bracelet nullified those, too. The monsters' attention was now directed entirely at Zara.

"I'll keep them occupied. Hurry and get as far away from here as you can!"

There was no guarantee that more of these foster children of Gahra, or whatever they were, wouldn't appear. Zara could manage fighting them alone, but it would be difficult if he had to protect those four people as well. That was why he told them to run.

"Sorry."

The man beckoned to the woman and children and they fled to the north. Just before their figures disappeared over the hill, Zara saw the woman give him a bow.

As the travelers ran, Zara slashed continuously at the faceless ghosts, but he didn't kill any of them. He didn't know whether something would happen if he took out too many.

The movements of the faceless ghosts were unfamiliar and strange, but they weren't very fast. Also, because slashing them would stall them for a bit, he felt no fear fighting them. What he was afraid of was what would happen after he killed them.

The faceless ghosts fired lightning bolts at him intermittently, but they didn't do any damage, thanks to Alestra's Bracelet. The creatures always fired their blasts simultaneously, which made them easy to handle.

After Zara decided he had bought enough time, he killed the remaining faceless ghosts one by one. After the last of the foster children exploded into powder snow and vanished, he braced himself and waited to see what would happen. Nothing.

He then noticed the girl was standing next to him. Her face was

deathly pale.

Zara cleaned off his sword, sheathed it, and smiled.

“Doesn’t look like Gahra is angry with me.”

But he’d spoken too soon.

13

The ground rumbled. Over time, the quaking grew more intense. Zara and the girl held each other, waiting for the shaking to stop.

But there was no end to it. A clamorous noise reverberated through the mountains, sounding at once like thunder and as if something were being smashed into pieces.

Something’s coming. Something impossibly huge is coming from the ravine.

The presence Zara felt was enormous. An adversary with destructive potential rivaling a natural disaster was manifesting before them.

Thanks to the clear weather, they could see every mountain peak in the vicinity. The shaking was causing avalanches, sending snow tumbling down the mountains.

Zara shut his lips tight and observed the developing situation.

On the other side of the towering cliff, the face of an enormous woman appeared. Zara and his companion were standing about six meters from the cliff. The beautiful woman’s face was just over the edge, her eyes closed.

Actually, she wasn’t right in front of the cliff. Her face was actually several hundred yards away or possibly even farther than that. It only appeared to be closer because of its colossal size.

It was made of snow, ice, and rock, so rather than describing it as a giant woman’s face, it would be more accurate to call it a white, icy mountain carved into the shape of a woman.

If it stretched all the way up from the base of the cliff, which was so far down it wasn’t visible, then it was taller than any mountain that towered above Baldemost.

The mountain with the woman’s visage continued to rise. It had long hair extending past its waist in the form of snowy white icicles. Its enormous white face was a carved glacier. The full spectacle was reminiscent of a woman wearing a white evening dress.

The eyes and mouth opened rigidly, each revealing a jet-black abyss and nothing more. Her expression was twisted with hatred, pain, and sadness.

This enormous ice monster assuming the form of a woman loosed a wail from its “mouth.”

Ooooooooo..... Ooooooooo.....

The sight of its mouth opening caused Zara's stomach to turn.

The sound of its cry echoed off the surrounding mountains. The monster screamed again.

Ooooooooo..... Ooooooooo.....

The area was enshrouded with black clouds, and a blizzard began raging. The monster enveloped itself in the black clouds and began to rock back and forth like a mother who had just lost a child.

Ooooooooo..... Ooooooooo.....

The winds blew violently, as if responding to the wails of despair.

The gale assaulted Zara and the girl, carrying snow with incredible force behind it. Zara ducked, held on to the girl as tightly as he could, and tried his best to endure the blustering onslaught. After the wind passed, the girl let slip a whimper of despair, but she kept a brave face.

"That daughter of Gahra. If see her, too late. All die."

The ground shook again. The quaking ramped up very quickly, to the extent that it seemed like it was trying to throw everything off the mountain.

While continuing to support the girl with his right hand, Zara used his left to take off his mask and then remove his hat and earmuffs, which were both made of animal fur. He then turned toward the enraged daughter of Gahra and called out with a loud voice:

"O Goddess! O Gahra! O daughter of Gahra! Please hear my words!"

Zara looked ahead with his feet planted firmly in the snow, undeterred by the tremors.

"I am Arza, son of Panzel! I am also known as Zara. I offer my humble greeting to the great daughter born of the gods Zara and Gahra!"

Zara's right arm was wrapped around the girl, and she watched as he addressed the divine being with a sonorous voice.

"Spilling blood on your sacred ground was my crime. For that, I deeply apologize. I ask that you find it in yourself to forgive me. I drew my sword out of necessity to protect a group of humans, the beloved children of the gods. I was not making light of you or your family, nor did I see you as a god of destruction and attempt to drive you away. I beseech you. Let your rage be quelled."

Hearing Zara's calm, authoritative voice, his companion straightened her back, focused her gaze on the divine spirit, and stood

by his side as if his words and thoughts applied to her as well.

The divine being fixed them both with a stare.

“If you honor my plea, I will become your sword and smite your enemies. Please be calm, O great god of the mountains! Please accept my humble declaration!”

Once Zara had loudly sworn his oath, he took off his right glove, bit the tip of his middle finger, and held his hand up to the sky. A stream of blood dripped down from the finger, which was picked up by the wind and inhaled by the raging deity.

But the tremors did not end. The blizzard, which had calmed for a bit, gained new ferocity. Zara and the girl grabbed each other and fell to the ground, their stamina all but drained. Their total lack of visibility and their inability to move made escape impossible. They merely did their best to endure the blizzard as they were thrown around by the earthquakes.

Zara had no idea how much time had passed. It seemed the blizzard and the shaking would never end. Eventually, though, the weather began to subside, and peace finally returned to the mountain.

When the sky cleared, they could see stars. Night had fallen.

Zara and the girl erected a tent in a mountain crevice. Zara opened his Treasury, pulled out the first pelt he found, then wrapped it around himself and lay down.

This was the first time either of them had felt fear or exhaustion of this magnitude. Unaware of who reached out first, the two hugged each other close in their desperate need for solidarity.

Zara knew a woman’s skin for the first time. It was a new experience for the girl as well. He was aroused by her scent, and after getting swept up in the flames of passion, the two made love. After joining multiple times, a single thought weighed on Zara’s mind before he fell into a deep sleep.

I wonder if that family is safe...

14

When Zara awoke in the morning, he was shocked by how refreshed he felt. Even the cut on his finger had healed completely. He took out his adventurer medal and ran a finger over it.

Normally, you needed the merchant skill Appraisal to scan an adventurer medal, but you could check the status of your own with a simple touch.

He had become level 68. He’d gone up three levels. Those foster children of Gahra, or whatever they were, must have given him a lot

of experience.

But he wasn't sure when the level-up had occurred. In dungeons, level-ups happened after a battle. In the outside world, though, you could only level up if you went to a shrine and had a priest or monk with the Oath skill pray for you.

He didn't really understand what had happened, so he put the thought from his mind for the moment.

15

One week later, the two of them reached the ravine.

The girl said she was going to a trading post due west of their current location. Zara considered joining her but ultimately decided to travel east through the Great Ravine as he had originally planned.

There were multiple villages and a labyrinth within the ravine. The region was also home to many powerful monsters. There was a famous training hall in Aldana to the south, and Zara had planned to ask the martial artists there to train him.

As they were about to part ways, the girl spoke up.

"I decided my name."

"Oh really? What did you pick?"

"Shariezara."

"Shariezara. That's a nice name."

"You think so?"

"Yes, I do."

The girl grinned wide. Zara thought he would never forget her smile.

He said his good-byes and headed east, occasionally turning around and waving. The girl spent a long time watching him go.

Shariezara. In the language of the mountainfolk, the name meant "the one who waits for Zara."

Interlude 2

The minotaur felt a burning irritation. The cause was clear.

What happened to that human?

What happened to that human who broke my neck and triumphed over me in battle?

Why has that human not come back?

He has no worthy enemies other than me.

I have no worthy enemies other than him.

He has to come back.

Where is he?

The long wait was only the first source of the minotaur's irritation.

It thought back on the human's fighting style. In truth, it did not need to.

Ever since its first loss, the fighting style of that human had been constantly replaying in its mind, even as it fought other challengers. And in the many alternative scenarios the minotaur imagined, it never once defeated him.

That human bested the minotaur with his sword skill; with his muscle; with his barehanded technique; with his foresight, strategy, and his ability to bait his opponent; with his extensive knowledge of combat. The human used all of that to defeat the minotaur over and over again.

As I am now, even if we fight again, I will lose.

Every time that thought passed through its mind, it shook its head violently and punched a rock or the wall around it, refusing to accept the notion. However, the sharper its sense for battle became, the more unavoidable its loss felt.

A long time had passed since it fought that human. Because the minotaur had no way to keep track of time, it had no idea how many years or even decades it had been. It did, however, understand that it had been waiting entirely too long.

At first, it had looked forward to the wait. It would defeat all the strong humans who ventured into its boss room, and while anticipating its rematch, it honed its skills and studied human fighting

techniques. It was happy to expand its knowledge.

But eventually, the minotaur began to feel that too much time had passed.

The human probably had used all this time to become even stronger. He was likely fighting countless battles in the world of light where humans lived and had grown stronger than the minotaur could ever imagine.

The minotaur knew it would no longer grow from its fights against the human challengers who ventured into its room.

No good.

No good.

This place is no good.

In order to fight him, in order to have a good battle, in order to kill him...

I need to find new battles somewhere other than here.

But where that place was, the minotaur did not know.

Chapter 13

The Rock Man

1

Zara was traveling quickly up a rocky path, holding a war hammer with a slim handle and a relatively small head.

He heard a hiss, and another rock snake leaped out from behind a rock and attacked him. His hammer *whooshed* through the air as he swung it, connecting with the snake's head, which made a crunching sound on impact.

Anyone who saw that would have been amazed this adventurer had the force to crush the creature's head in midair. They would have also marveled at his skill with a hammer. A war hammer could be difficult to control thanks to the center of gravity being at the end of its long shaft.

But Zara himself wasn't satisfied with his skill.

If Uncle saw that, he would probably say something like "that's the sound your hammer makes, boy?"

He had a massive hammer stored in his Treasury, which Logan had given him as a parting gift. Because of its weight, however, it drained his stamina almost instantly whenever he used it. The hammer he was using now was a bit smaller, and he'd had it for longer.

Rock snakes lunged at him from left and right. Zara adjusted his position and crushed the heads of the two in a single swing. He also took care to avoid the venom that splattered from their bodies on impact.

At first, he had used a one-handed sword as he always did. Though they were weak monsters, rock snakes were formidable adversaries and attacked in waves. As a result, his swords quickly became damaged and unusable. After being forced to put a third one-handed sword back in his Treasury, he'd decided to fight with this war hammer.

Lord Percival would probably say that a sword won't get damaged if swung skillfully enough.

Zara wondered how Percival would handle the situation in which he

currently found himself. He very much wanted to be more like him one day.

No, Lord Percival would probably run through them all and avoid their attacks without even drawing his blade.

As Zara pondered this, a group of desert orcs appeared in front of him. Zara moved the war hammer to his left hand, drew his sword with his right, picked up speed, and charged directly at them.

It's at least true that this is a road where lots of monsters appear.

That was what he thought about as he engaged the orcs.

2

The Great Ravine was a giant gash in the earth.

According to legend, it was created when the giant god Boho used his bare hands to rip apart the land between the Gahra Mountains and the highlands as a demonstration of his strength.

In a different legend, Chakrapokka, the god of water, washed away the land along with the greedy humans who lived upon it.

The Great Ravine was surrounded by the Gahra Mountains on one side and a mountain range continuing into the highlands on the other, both of which were difficult to travel through. In contrast, the inside of the ravine had a warm climate and was easy to traverse, despite the occasional strong wind and rain. There was also a river flowing through it.

As a result, there were lots of settlements in the Great Ravine, and it had even become a road connecting east and west and was often traveled by merchants.

There were grasslands and forests in the ravine as well, but the road Zara was on right now consisted only of steep cliffs and rocks.

Zara headed east after parting ways with Shariezara. He slept outside for three days and found a village on the fourth. As he was having a meal at an inn, he was approached by three villagers.

One of them introduced himself as the village headman.

“Are you an adventurer?”

“Yes.”

“Would you be willing to accept a request of ours?”

“A quest? You mean without going through the guild?”

“There are no adventurer guilds or anything of the sort around these parts. I assume you won't take a request unless it's through the guild?”

“No, that's not true. I'll hear what you have to say first, and then I'll give you my answer.”

“Here's the situation. Two months ago, a giant made of rock settled

down in a valley on the edge of this village.”

“A giant made of rock?”

Zara had never heard of such a thing. It was most likely some type of monster.

“That’s right. It’s three times— No, five times taller than humans. It occasionally cries out in an unsettling voice. It’s a terrifying sound, which carries all the way to the edge of the village. The residents are scared and unable to focus on their work.”

That voice might have had a curse effect on the villagers, causing them to lose their nerve.

“If that was all, we could have just ignored it, but in these last two months, three villagers have gone missing. Fearing the worst, we approached the valley, and when we looked down into it, the missing people’s clothes and belongings were in the monster’s usual spot.”

“Huh. Something needs to be done about it.”

“You’re right about that. But there’s more to the story. The clothes in the valley were not just from this village. It seems a number of travelers have been falling victim as well.”

“Does the monster ever leave the valley?”

“We have never seen it do so. There are some who say it uses its cursed voice to lure victims into the valley.”

“Cursed voice?”

“Believing the number of casualties would only rise until the monster was eradicated, the villagers got some money together. We then asked a passing adventurer if he would accept our request. Once he saw the monster, though, he said the money we were offering as a reward was too little.”

The village headman told Zara how much the villagers had managed to scrape together. It definitely wasn’t a sum for which one would want to risk their life.

“We then turned to Narillia for advice.”

“Who is Narillia?”

“A married couple of apothecaries moved into this village four years ago. The wife’s name is Narillia, and she has a great deal of knowledge about many things.”

“Ah, I see.”

“Narillia said she would try out a number of poisons she had in stock. Unfortunately, none of them worked.”

Poison? For a rock giant?

Poison isn’t very effective against rock-type monsters. It’s not very effective against giants, either.

A poison effective against a rock giant would have to be very powerful. It isn’t likely that an apothecary in a remote village like this would possess such a poison.

"I then asked Narillia if there was any means available to us, and she said there may be one."

"Oh really? What did she mean?"

"I suppose it would be better for Narillia to explain from here."

The village headman turned to the person at his back.

"Jaka, bring Narillia here."

Jaka nodded and left. When he returned, there was a woman following behind him. She was most likely Narillia, the apothecary.

Her luscious black hair fell around her in waves, glistening brilliantly, as if she had just taken a bath. She had jade eyes and thick eyebrows, a pointed nose, deep-red lips, and a slightly protruding chin.

She was dressed like an ordinary villager in her reddish-brown blouse and faded skirt, but even so, she had a powerful presence. If she wore the proper clothes, she would probably pass for a noble.

"Oh my. I wasn't expecting someone so young."

"This is the apothecary, Narillia. Narillia, could you please tell Zara about the method you proposed for defeating the monster?"

"Of course. Zara, was it? In order to kill the rock man, we need a certain poison. A special ingredient is required to make it, and that is the venom sac of a ketsarupa."

A ketsarupa?

"There is a cave slightly north of this village, and it's said there are ketsarupas in there."

"Yes, that's right. There have always been ketsarupas in that cave. That is common knowledge among the villagers," added the headman.

"Poison isn't very effective against rock-type monsters, but ketsarupa venom will undoubtedly work. Purification is a bit difficult, but with a bit of processing, I'll be able to make a poison strong enough to kill even a stone golem."

The cave was close enough that you could walk there and back in a day. Zara was given a map, but because it was mostly just one road, it seemed like there was no need to worry about getting lost. There were, however, lots of monsters on the road, making it dangerous to travel for nonadventurers.

"But this is too big a burden for a young adventurer like you. You don't need to do anything unreasonable, Zara."

"What are you saying, Narillia? Didn't that rock man kill your husband?" interrupted Jaka.

"Oh, darling, I don't believe my husband is dead. His belongings haven't been discovered, after all. I'm sure he's just fooling around somewhere, fawning over the discovery of some rare medicinal herb," she insisted as the three men looked at her with pity in their eyes.

"Hmm. In short, this terrible situation is going to continue until

someone reaches that cave. I just have to get there and procure a ketsarupa venom sac, is that right?”

The three men nodded in confirmation. Narillia looked somewhat flustered.

“Th-that’s right, but, Zara, do you know what a ketsarupa is?”

“Yes. I am an adventurer.”

Just then, a voice echoed from some distant place.

Nnnnooooo.....eeeeee.....raaaaaaaa...

“Ah, th-that’s the monster’s cursed voice.”

“I see.”

The village headman seemed very frightened, but to Zara, the voice sounded more sorrowful than scary. It didn’t sound very “cursed” to him.

“Understood. I accept your request.”

“Oh! You’re actually taking it?”

“Huh?! Don’t be reckless, Zara.”

“I’ll be careful.”

3

He arrived at the cave. The road there turned out to be very simple after all.

Zara opened his Treasury and took out a dagger. He had a sheath attached to the side of his belt, and he stowed the dagger inside it. Without this dagger, he probably wouldn’t have been able to accept this request.

Ketsarupas were magical beasts with a monster level of 60. They looked like giant centipedes.

Their individual attacks weren’t very powerful, but they existed in great numbers in the dark caves they inhabited and had lethal venom in their pincers and tails. Their bodies also released a poison mist, so just the act of venturing into a cave inhabited by ketsarupas was deadly. Subjugation tasks were always assigned to parties of S-rank adventurers.

A ketsarupa’s venom sac was located behind its heart, so it couldn’t be extracted without killing one.

Zara held a one-handed sword in his right hand and a kite shield in his left.

Maybe I should switch out the one-handed sword for more power.

No. I need to become capable of fighting powerful enemies without

relying on blessed weapons. That should be one of my major goals. Even using this dagger would be excessive.

After making up his mind, he ventured into the cave. He activated a Night Vision skill, and about two hundred steps in, an enemy appeared.

A ketsarupa had dropped from the ceiling.

It nimbly twisted its body as it fell and attacked with the large pincers on its head.

Zara dodged out of the way, waited for the enemy to land, and after its pincers clinked together, he severed one of them at its base. The pain caused the ketsarupa to flinch, at which point he cut off its other pincer.

Another ketsarupa leaped at him from the left. Zara angled his body to dodge its pincers, and it then swung its tail down from above its head.

He blocked the tip of its tail with his kite shield and slashed at one of its pincers near the base. His aim must have been off, however, because it didn't look like it took any damage.

The first ketsarupa rejoined the fray and tried to crush him. Zara delivered a vertical slash to its soft underbelly, and it lurched backward, falling over and leaking bodily fluids. The second ketsarupa surged from the left and attacked with its pincers, but after Zara dodged, it crashed into the first and lost its balance. Zara then cut off one of the second monster's pincers.

At that moment, his Sense skill told him a third was approaching.

I need to move now.

Zara made a quick decision, spun around, and ran for the entrance.

The two injured ketsarupas chased him, but the third did not. It hadn't yet gotten close enough to Zara to acknowledge him as an enemy.

He ran until he was close enough to the mouth of the cave to see some dim light and turned around to face his two pursuers.

When ketsarupas ran, their bodies extended almost into a straight line, which made them a very easy target if you had the proper speed and skill.

One venom sac is probably good enough.

Zara sprang nimbly into the air and did a somersault above the leading ketsarupa. Then when its head was directly below him, he thrust his sword down, slicing vertically through its entire body as it charged past. Naturally, its heart and venom sac were bisected as well.

The other ketsarupa flew past him, stabbing with its tail as it did. Zara twisted his body in midair and largely avoided the strike, but it did end up lightly grazing his left leg just below the knee.

He landed and gathered himself.

The ketsarupa's momentum carried it far past Zara. It turned around and charged again.

Zara leaped backward so the monster he'd already taken down wouldn't get in his way. It was writhing on the ground, venom flying from its sliced-open back.

The ketsarupa charging at him was the one he'd cut both pincers off. It knocked aside the carcass of its dead companion as it ran at him. Zara dodged easily, then sliced open its shell at a joint in the middle of its body.

After that, his work was easy. He slashed off its rattling tail and waited until it almost completely stopped moving. He then cut out its venom sac, took a container he had previously been entrusted with from his Treasury, and placed the prize inside.

He checked his left leg, but his clothing wasn't torn. It seemed he had only suffered a light bruise.

I'm disappointed I couldn't do this without taking any damage.

Zara reflected on the fight as his instructor Logan's angry face flashed across his mind.

4

He knocked on the door.

"Comiiiiing. Who is it?" answered a voice from inside, and the door opened.

Narillia's beautiful jade eyes opened wide after she saw Zara.

"N-n-no way. Y-you're back?"

"Yes, and I successfully procured a ketsarupa venom sac. Please have a look."

"Really?! Ah, well, a-anyway. Come inside."

Narillia invited Zara in and then inspected the delivery.

"There's no doubt. This is a ketsarupa venom sac. You actually got one."

"Yes, I did."

"W-well. Ah, have you eaten lunch?"

"No, not yet."

"All right, I'll go throw something together, so wait here."

The meal was extravagant and consisted of a lot of meat, so Zara couldn't imagine it had actually been prepared so impromptu.

Whether you were a noble or a commoner, courtesy dictated that you use your own knife when eating at someone else's house, so Zara used his dagger to cut the meat.

"This is delicious. I don't know how you managed this taste after

poisoning the food. You could work as a chef for a noble family.”

After she heard that, Narillia dropped her act. Her cheerful and kind demeanor vanished, and her beautiful face turned cold and arrogant.

“When did you notice?”

“The moment we first met. I’ve spent nearly two full years delving into a labyrinth. I know a monster when I sense one.”

“Why are you not dying?”

“The antidotes found in labyrinths don’t work in the outside world. It’s also common for items with poison-resistance blessings to not work outside, either. Still, some items are exempt from that rule.”

“I see. Since you managed to get a ketsarupa venom sac, your level must be high, right?”

“I’m level sixty-eight.”

“*Sixty-eight?* What is an adventurer as powerful as you doing in a place like this?”

For some reason, her expression and tone suddenly shifted back to that of a normal villager. Her amicable demeanor might have actually been her true character, surprising as that was.

“All right then. You’re level sixty-eight.”

Narillia closed her eyes, thinking about something. Her eyes then flashed open, showing vertically split irises.

“Then die!”

Her body began to morph dramatically, her clothes tearing in the process.

She doubled in height. She remained the same beautiful woman on the top half of her body, but the bottom half transformed into that of a giant snake.

She’s a lamia!

Lamias were hellish creatures that possessed the faces of beautiful women and long, serpentine bodies. They led their victims to ruin by tricking them with heresy. They belonged to the demon family of monsters and were female spirits that hated humans and their blessings from the gods.

As soon as he realized what she was, Zara threw his dagger. It pierced her heart the moment her transformation ended.

“Owwwwww. What...is this? What is this?”

Now it was Zara’s turn to be surprised.

Why?

Why did a demon survive being stabbed with Kaldan’s Dagger and its holy element?

“Ah, this feels somehow nostalgic. This really...hmmm...puts me at ease,” murmured the lamia, wrapping her hands around the dagger still in her heart.

Zara was at a total loss for words.

Then came a knock at the door.

5

“Narillia, you’re in there, right? Open the door. It’s me, Jaka.”

Zara had sensed someone coming. He’d decided it would be best to show the village this woman’s true form, but now that didn’t feel right. It would be better for the village not to know what she was until he fully understood what was going on.

“Narillia. Please don’t let him know that I’m here.”

Zara quickly retrieved his dagger and hid in the bedroom without making a sound.

“Huh? Um. Huh? I—I—I... Huh?”

Left alone, the lamia glanced around at her exposed form, the remains of her clothes on the ground, the food on the table, and then looked at the door.

“Narillia, is everything all right? I heard a shout. Is everything okay?”

“Ah, Jaka, h-hello. U-um, I was just... I was just having a meal. But I’m not dressed right now. Please don’t come in.”

“...Why were you eating without your clothes on?”

“W-well. I was eating. And then... My hair... Yeah, I got soup in my hair. So I started to wash it. And then... It spilled onto my clothes and body, too. So I’m wiping myself off. I-I’m naked right now, so don’t come in. P-please wait just a bit!”

“Oh, is that right? Sounds rough. Got it. I’ll wait as long as you need.”

Narillia returned to her human form, wet her hair, and cleared away her torn clothes. She was about to open the door but then realized she was still naked, so she went into the bedroom, put some clothes on, and welcomed Jaka in.

When she locked eyes with Zara in the bedroom, she gave him the dirtiest look she could manage and hissed at him to let him know they had unfinished business.

“I accidentally made too much food. You can have some if you like, Jaka.”

“W-wow. Of course, that would be great. Man, you just made my day, Narillia.”

Jaka was in very high spirits after being offered some home cooking. As if thinking she needed one more push to fully deceive him, Narillia offered him some alcohol as well. He refused at first, out of formality, but before long, he obliged and was plastered in no time.

He then began flirting with her.

“Narillia. I know you’re aware of my feelings. Your husband has already kicked the bucket. Won’t you be mine?”

“No, my husband will definitely return. I know it.”

“He was nowhere near as faithful to you. He probably abandoned you after catching sight of some other girl.”

“No, my husband still thinks of me every day. Even now. I know it.”

“A woman like you deserves better than a good-for-nothing man who couldn’t offer you more than this pitiful lifestyle. If you change your mind and decide you want to be with me, I can offer you lots of beautiful clothes.”

“Oh my. Have you become a powerful man, Jaka?”

“Just take a look at this. And this, and this. I’ll give them all to you.”

“Wow, these are beautiful. Huh? Isn’t that the ring Mina wore before she went missing...?”

“Huh? Ah, well, I guess it does look similar.”

“And this is the bracelet I gave Zando’s daughter. You... You’re the one who killed everyone!”

“Ah, sh-shit. Shut your trap, woman. I’ll kill you, too.”

“That’s enough.”

Jaka paled at the sight of Zara suddenly appearing from the bedroom.

“Y-you... You’re that kid who went to the cave. Shit. You set me up.”

Jaka tried to run, but Zara subdued him.

“Y-you bitch. You doubted me from the beginning, didn’t you? Then you had the adventurer hide, and you seduced me into giving you the ring and bracelet. S-so that’s how it is. The village headman must have been involved with this, too. Th-that was dirty. You’re a dreadful woman. You’re a monster. A demon. I’m going to call you a lamia from now on!”

“U-ummm...thank you?”

6

They dragged Jaka to the home of the village headman, and he confessed to his crimes. When they searched his house, they found a significant amount of damning evidence.

This meant that fighting the rock man was no longer worth the small amount of money the village was offering, so the request was canceled. Zara didn’t mention he had already gotten the venom sac.

“So you missed out on the reward money. At least take the

ketsarupa venom sac. Honestly, you'll be able to sell it for a much higher price than the request would have paid you."

"The reward I want most is information. Would you mind telling me about yourself?"

"Right. That's only fair. Come to my house one more time."

The two of them returned to Narillia's house, and she made some sweet smelling tea.

"Where should I start? Ah, before that, can I see your dagger?"

Zara gave her the dagger, and she hugged it to her chest.

"I knew it. This aura reminds me of Lady Kaldan," she cooed.

"That's a blessed item known as Kaldan's Dagger, and it cures poison and status ailments, among other effects. Did you know the wicked dragon Kaldan?"

"She wasn't a wicked dragon! Lady Kaldan was a very, very kind goddess!"

Surprisingly, Narillia said she was over one thousand years old and that she'd served as an attendant for the goddess Kaldan when she was a human.

The goddess Olgoria, however, was jealous of Kaldan's beauty and popularity, and after convincing the surrounding countries of Kaldan's wickedness, she brought to ruin all the nations to which Kaldan had given her blessings.

Narillia had stayed by Kaldan's side longer than any of her other attendants, and Olgoria personally turned her into a lamia. Kaldan was unable to lift the curse. She'd apologized tearfully to Narillia, asked her to do her best to find some modicum of happiness, and then departed for the edge of the world along with the spirits of her husband and her familiars.

Zara was surprised by her tale. The goddess Olgoria was associated with wisdom and harmony and was worshipped in Baldemost and the northern part of the continent as one of the six major deities. Anyone in Baldemost would have said Narillia was speaking utter nonsense.

But Zara thought he should hear her out. He chose to listen because before he leaving on his journey, he'd been told another side of a legend widely believed in Baldemost.

7

On the day he would embark on his journey, Zara had gone to say farewell to Julius.

Their houses were of equal rank as they were both noble, landowning families, but House Goran wouldn't have existed without

House Mercurius. They owed everything to Julius for making Panzel his vassal.

And that wasn't all. It was House Mercurius that had taken Zara in and raised him. Zara's loyalty would forever lie with the royal family and with them.

Julius had prepared Zara an extraordinary present: the five blessed items treasured by House Mercurius.

Alestra's Bracelet, which negated magic at the user's discretion.

Kaldan's Dagger, which protected the user from status ailments and poison.

Raika's Ring, which fired offensive magic.

Ende's Shield, which reflected physical attacks back at the user's opponent.

Bolton's Charm, which absorbed magic power and granted invisibility.

These five treasures were regularly taken into the labyrinth by the former head of House Mercurius, Percival. Two of them, Alestra's Bracelet and Kaldan's Dagger, had been in the possession of the minotaur. It was thought that the minotaur obtained them after killing Percival.

Alestra's Bracelet was then given to Zara's father, Panzel, by the minotaur when he was a young boy. Panzel had returned the bracelet to Julius, which was the impetus for bringing the boy in to serve House Mercurius. Panzel borrowed and used the bracelet from the time of the Pantram Revolt until his death.

Panzel also received Kaldan's Dagger from the minotaur after becoming a knight and defeating it. The blessings of the dagger were what allowed Panzel to make it safely back to the surface from the bottom floor of the Sazardon Labyrinth. He then returned the dagger to Julius.

Panzel had been able to use all five of the blessed items. When Zara turned fourteen and it came time for him to challenge the Sazardon Labyrinth, Julius had him test them all out. When he did, Zara was able to activate all five blessings.

Julius loaned Alestra's Bracelet and Kaldan's Dagger to Zara at that time. Zara was able to become an S-rank adventurer in such an astoundingly short time thanks in large part to those two blessed items and to Bora's Sword, which he'd inherited from his father.

"I want you to have these five blessed items on your trip."

He summoned a servant sorcerer who specialized in rune carving. The servant then engraved Raika's Ring, Ende's Shield, and Bolton's Charm with Zara's mark of ownership. Alestra's Bracelet and Kaldan's

Dagger were already marked. That was how the five treasures of House Mercurius wound up in Zara's Treasury.

Julius had dismissed the servant and spoken to Zara with a hushed voice.

"This is a secret of our family, but I want you to hear it."

It was widely told that Alestra's Bracelet was bestowed upon the founding king by the goddess Pharah and that the founding king then granted it to the first head of House Mercurius. According to the story passed down in House Mercurius, however, Alestra's Bracelet and all five of the treasures were given to the first head of the house by the dragon god Kaldan to reward him for his bravery and undying loyalty after he defeated her. It was also said that all five treasures could only be used by people whom the head of House Mercurius had recognized as worthy.

Baldemost Kingdom was established by the founding king and the heroes under the protection of the goddess Pharah after they defeated the wicked dragon Kaldan, who had caused so much suffering. It was fair to say this secret would cast doubt on the very origin of the kingdom. In other words, if word were to get out, it could spell the end of House Mercurius.

Zara was deeply moved that Julius trusted him enough to share that kind of secret with him.

"Arza. No, I should call you Zara. I looked up to my deceased father. I also looked up to Panzel, who was a hero this country could be proud of. I wanted to defeat that monster myself, but my battle is not in the labyrinth. Right now, I'm preparing myself for the most important battle of my life."

Julius was forty-two years old and held the position of Blue Minister, the third-highest ministerial position. It was believed that he would soon rise to Red Minister, which would spark a battle between Julius and the Duke of Riga as each attempted to steer Baldemost's government in the direction they desired.

"Zara, I am lending you these five blessed items until the day you defeat that monster. Take them on your trip and learn how to use them. And make sure to become so strong that you do not instinctively rely on their blessings."

8

"What kind of person is your husband?"

"My husband? We met in the borderlands to the west. He was still a child at the time."

Narillia said she'd spent ten years living with a family until they were killed by thieves. She then traveled alone with the one boy who survived, telling people they were mother and son. Due to the fact that Narillia never aged, however, that relationship eventually stopped making sense, so for some number of years they had been telling people they were married.

She had been living inconspicuously as an apothecary, helping people by utilizing the knowledge she had gained from Kaldan long ago.

"Is your husband still alive?"

"As I've been saying, he's alive. You've been hearing his voice every day."

"Does that mean the rock man is your husband?"

"That's right. He was...cursed."

"Why did you curse your husband?"

"I didn't curse him! He just wanted so badly..."

"What did he want?"

"...He said he wanted so badly to be my real husband. I *told* him he would be cursed if we lay together, because I'm a lamia... *Ngh... Hic... Sniff...*"

"...Do you need a moment?"

"No, I'll be okay... My beloved's body became covered in snake scales, and even now, he suffers from a curse of creeping poison."

"Snake scales? That doesn't match the description I heard."

"To speed up the removal of the curse, I covered his body in dirt, which enhances curse and poison removal and raises stamina recovery. Also, he wouldn't have been able to withstand the poison if he'd remained the size of a normal human, so I made him significantly larger. I then used a charm to harden his skin and prevent the dirt from falling off. There's a river in the valley, and even berries and edible grass, so he should have had enough food and water. I told him to stay quiet, but he's been making an awful racket."

The rock man's true identity turned out to be that of a human in the middle of recovery. According to Narillia, he would return to his normal form in just two to three weeks.

9

Zara stayed at the inn for one more night and then departed early the next morning. For some unknown reason, his level had increased to 71.

Narillia kindly came to see him off and gave him a wide variety of

medicines, which she said she had made herself. Some had questionable effects, however.

Zara thanked her, and when he was about to leave, he heard the voice again.

Naaaaa.....uiiiiii.....laaaaa...

Zara strained his ears and listened.

“Was that your husband again?”

“Y-yes.”

“What is he saying?”

“You should know. You’ve heard it enough times!”

“I’m sorry, I can’t understand him.”

Narillia looked away and spoke in a small voice.

“He’s calling my name. He’s saying ‘Narillia.’ ”

Interlude 3

Holding a broad longsword in its right hand, the minotaur left the boss room of the one hundredth floor for the first time in a while.

It was quickly attacked by a basilisk.

Basilisks were giant snakes that slithered through the corridors at high speeds. They had diamond-shaped heads so heavy and tough that they were reminiscent of giants' hammers. Something that looked like the comb of a rooster or the dorsal fin of a fish extended from their heads and halfway down their bodies. Their mouths were comically large and packed with razor-sharp teeth strong enough to shatter stone.

The most fearsome part of the basilisk was its tongue. It could extend and branch as fast as lightning. It could also reach enemies from very far away. One touch of the tongue would turn the victim to stone. Being turned to stone in a labyrinth meant you were as good as dead.

Basilisks could also secrete a slimy bodily fluid. That fluid was a deadly poison that caused rapid decline of all bodily functions and relentlessly sapped the life of its victim.

The one hundredth floor of the Sazardon Labyrinth was made up of hallways connected in concentric circles, with many stone rooms strewn about.

The staircase connecting to the upper floors was in the center, and the boss room was located in the hallway farthest from that point. The farther you progressed into the floor, the more basilisks you would find slithering around.

If you tried to avoid the basilisks by entering a stone room, however, in most cases you would encounter an even more dangerous monster. For that reason, long ago when humans first reached this floor, they reported that it was hell itself.

The minotaur cut off the tongue of the attacking basilisk and activated its Analysis skill, as well as a skill that gave it status-ailment resistance and kicked the basilisk's head up into the air.

The basilisk lunged at the minotaur's side as it rose from the ground.

The minotaur quickly found the basilisk's heart using its Analysis skill. For some reason, the basilisk's heart was not near its head but nearer the middle of its body. The minotaur thrust its sword into the serpent's underbelly and sliced open its heart. The monster's hide was incredibly tough, but its underbelly was soft.

By the time it landed, it was already dead. Its giant body soon disappeared, leaving behind a breastplate. It was made with basilisk scales, which gave it high defense and also resistance to status ailments.

Basilisks dropped excellent armor. Wearing a full set would increase the user's magic and physical defense and also reflect attacks inflicting status ailments at double the strength.

It was an item the minotaur no longer had any interest in, so it left the breastplate behind and continued walking. After it encountered one more basilisk and killed it, the minotaur stepped into a stone room.

There was a hydra inside.

Hydras were magical beasts that were designated disaster-level threats when they appeared in the world of humans. They had bodies as large as elephants and bore nine heads and a single tail. They were covered in extremely hard scales, and each of their heads breathed deadly poison gas as they twisted and turned around one another.

The biggest reason hydras were such a nuisance to fight was because of their regenerative ability. Even if you managed to cut off a leg, a head, or any part of a hydra's body, it would grow back in the blink of an eye. Any injuries healed instantly as well. In order to kill a hydra, you had to first halt its regeneration, and the only way to do that was to cut off the heads responsible for it.

Two of the nine heads held the key to regeneration. Their location differed every time. By severing both nearly simultaneously, the hydra's regenerative ability would be dramatically diminished.

In the outside world, there was a particular strategy that was considered the most logical way to fight one. First, you would use magic to both hinder its movement and locate the two heads responsible for regeneration and sever them together. You would then cut off the remaining heads and, using something like a ballista or a battering ram, continue to attack it until its life force depleted.

Hydras had the highest resistance to magic attacks out of all known monsters, and they had an astonishingly high level of vitality. Consequently, it was difficult to kill them any other way.

In other words, whether a human had any chance against a hydra depended on how well they could restrict its movement. It was a difficult thing to manage with any method other than magic.

Chains and ropes would be severed by the jagged scales, and even if

hundreds of people were to try to move hydra all at once, they wouldn't stand a chance against its weight and strength.

The method of trapping it by having it fall into a hole had been tried before, but that always ended in failure. The reason for that was because hydras had astounding leaping ability. No one understood how they were able to jump so high with their heavy legs. There were some who suggested it may have been a sort of flight. After jumping, hydras landed with force enough to demolish a small fortress.

As if able to sense something about the puny invader standing in front of it, the hydra jumped. It landed where the minotaur was standing.

If a human coming to this floor for the first time had encountered this hydra, they would have been extremely nervous about the sheer difficulty of the fight ahead.

However, all the minotaur was thinking as it faced this tenacious, multiheaded enemy for the first time in a while was how quickly it could defeat it.

The minotaur then engaged the hydra utilizing a method that humans had never thought of.

Chapter 14

The White Princess Ishkriella

1

K-tunk.

K-tunk.

The wheels of the carriage clattered as they traveled through the dark forest. A bearded man was holding the reins on the coachman's platform. He looked to be around thirty years old. He was wearing leather armor under his coat and he had a greatsword at his side. A shortened cigar was protruding from his mouth.

"How many times do I have to tell you—that stinks," complained a woman sitting next to him. She also looked to be about thirty years old or slightly younger. She was wearing a hat with a visor, as well as a coat.

"And as I've been saying, I'm almost done with it. But you know, this cigar is masking other scents. Once I finish it, you'll get to enjoy my wonderful body odor."

"Let the boy have that pleasure. I'll go rest inside for a while. Mini-flare!"

After her incantation, three orbs of light the size of fists appeared from her chest. She had a staff at the ready under her coat.

The orbs of light hit three of the five monsters jumping down at the carriage from the trees. The monsters let out short cries and fell to the ground, motionless. She had delivered accurate hits to their vital points.

The other two monsters screamed and crashed to the ground as well. Each had a knife sticking out of its face.

"Return," the man ordered, and the two knives flew to his hands. He reached out to grab a leaf, wiped the blood from their blades, and placed them back into the sheaths hidden in his leather armor.

"We've been seeing nothing but undead-type monsters here. That's rare."

"I'll say. I've seen more undead monsters in the last five days than I've seen in my entire life."

Monster was not a term that referred to any particular type of creature. It was just a name used by humans to refer to anything inhuman they considered a threat.

Some monsters were living creatures, and some were not. The nonliving creatures were referred to as undead or demon-type monsters, among other classifications. There were some that only had the appearance of living creatures and spawned fully grown rather than being born from parents. In most cases, nonliving creatures had hideous appearances, and the strongest ones attacked with vicious magic attacks or curses. Many were also capable of poisoning their enemies.

It was very rare to encounter undead-type monsters without going to specific labyrinths. Despite that, the group had been attacked incessantly by them for the last three days.

Before long, they arrived at a spot suitable for making camp.

“All right. It’s a little early, but let’s stop here for the night.”

“Sounds good to me.”

When the carriage came to a stop, a boy climbed out of it. It was Zara. He used a knife to cut down some branches that were in his way.

Next, a man around fifty years old wearing weathered priest garb got out. He took a look around the area, performed some kind of incantation, and raised both hands high above his head. This was a simple barrier spell often used when making camp. It made it difficult for monsters to approach and even had a number of beneficial effects such as stamina recovery.

The bearded man who was driving the carriage unfastened the horses and let them graze. The sorceress prepared a cookstove. Zara picked an even spot in the grass and laid down a pelt.

“The spot is ready.”

A box appeared from the carriage. It was sturdy and beautifully decorated and large enough to fit a small child. It was floating in midair as it left the carriage.

A woman wearing the white garb of a shrine maiden followed the box out of the carriage, holding her hands open as if carrying it. There was some distance between her and the cargo, however, so she wasn’t carrying it directly.

She was using the skill known as Invisible Hands. After quietly placing the box on the spot Zara had prepared, she let out a sigh of relief.

She was the White Princess Ishkriella. She was a famous soothsayer and this adventure’s client.

Zara had arrived at a big town after he made it through the Great Ravine. It even had an Adventurers Guild.

He'd considered taking on a request at the guild but had felt some hesitation. If he took a request, they would have to check his adventurer medal. Being an S-rank adventurer, he was worried he wouldn't be able to avoid standing out.

While he was eating at a tavern, a bearded man approached him after looking intently around the area.

"Ah, you're the one. I have words for you. Can you come to a room upstairs once you finish your meal?"

When Zara arrived at the room the man had specified, he was invited inside.

The bearded man was there, along with a woman in a white shrine maiden outfit, a second woman who looked like a sorceress, and another man dressed like a priest. The bearded man explained the situation.

"This woman here has business with you. She is the White Princess Ishkriella. I'm sure you've heard the name. As for the request..."

He nodded to a box that was set on the table.

"...Please escort this woman and this box to the Ocean Temple. The party will be me, you, and these two. We have a carriage, so travel will be easy. Ah, are you familiar with the Ocean Temple? It's on the edge of the peninsula directly east from here, at the very edge of the continent."

After being told the estimated number of days it would take to get there and confirming the reward, Zara accepted the request.

The bearded man's name was Borante. He used a greatsword as his main weapon, but he liked to use a variety of weapons depending on the opponent. He was also partial to projectiles such as throwing knives.

The sorceress's name was Himatra. She specialized in offensive magic. She was best at fire spells, and she could apparently also use a few binding spells.

The bulky monk's name was Gondona. He specialized in support magic. He said he lacked combat strength, but he had pride in his magic power. His rugged mace suggested he may have been stronger than he claimed, however.

Zara understood just by looking at the three of them that they were elite adventurers. He was impressed such a capable party had been brought together in such a rural area.

"Why did you approach me?"

“Hmm? Ah. I approached you because of the White Princess’s divination. It was the same for everyone else here. She says many powerful monsters will attack on the journey, so she needs a powerful escort.”

Zara doubted whether divination could be that accurate and detailed, but he had already accepted the request.

“My name is Zara. My primary weapon...”

He paused and tapped the hilt of the blade sheathed at his hip with his right hand.

“...is the sword.”

3

Even Zara, who was a little ignorant of worldly affairs, had heard of the White Princess Ishkriella.

She was a wandering shrine maiden who was called upon by royalty and wealthy merchants to perform divinations. She would predict the weather, fortunes, the outcomes of wars, the details of schemes, childbirth, one’s path through life, and just about anything else. She had apparently never once been wrong.

She would occasionally refuse divination even if offered vast sums of money, and she would sometimes advise people to walk their own path instead of relying on her.

When the end of the White Princess’s life drew near, she would choose a talented young girl as her successor, and then they would both hide themselves away. Years later, after the girl learned all the techniques and inherited the divine protection of the gods, a new shrine maiden would appear bearing the name of the White Princess Ishkriella.

Thus, the White Princess had been traveling the world for over one thousand years while receiving divine revelations from the gods.

There were many who falsely assumed the White Princess’s identity. However much they claimed to have the power of divination, though, they couldn’t pass themselves off as the real deal if they weren’t always carrying around a box. The box never left her side, not even for the smallest of movements, and it always floated next to her through the use of the Invisible Hands skill.

No ordinary person could imitate that. The Invisible Hands was a rare skill, and more importantly, using it for even a small amount of time sapped the user’s magic power immensely.

It was well-known that she rode in her own personal carriage and protected the box at all times, all while employing the Invisible Hands

skill the entire time. If one could replicate that without any kind of trick, they could make a lot of money for themselves, whether they were the genuine article or not.

The White Princess who was meditating in front of Zara was clearly the real thing. As the name suggested, her hair and skin were completely white. It wasn't a vivid white but rather a clear, almost translucent white reminiscent of crystals or water. There was an inhuman quality to it.

"Has she caught your fancy, boy?"

"Yes, I'm intrigued. There's something strange about her."

"Ah-ha-ha. Well put. But speaking of strangeness, you're plenty strange yourself. You seem like you're already used to setting up camp."

"I think so. But if you notice anything, please let me know."

"Wow, you're such a well-mannered boy."

It was made clear on the first day that Zara was not used to camping in the middle of a forest, but no one in the group scorned him for his inexperience.

The reason for that was what had happened on the first night. Just before they'd reached the campsite, they had been attacked by five gargoyles. When Zara saw them, he'd immediately jumped out of his seat and cut them all down in the blink of an eye.

Himatra was serving as the coachman, and by the time Borante and Gondona jumped out of the carriage in response to her cry, Zara was already sheathing his sword, looking as calm as could be.

In the borderlands, being able to defeat a gargoyle alone was held as proof that one was an elite knight, but there was no way a knight could actually kill a gargoyle without help.

Gargoyles were undead-type monsters that were quick, cunning, and very resistant to magic. They were humanoid, but they lacked hair, grew fangs, and had bat-like wings on their backs. Their bodies were as hard and heavy as bronze, and being struck or scratched by one would result in a grievous wound. They could also fly freely with their wings.

They were difficult monsters to kill.

The gargoyles Zara killed had all been decapitated, demonstrating his abnormal talent. Borante had let out a gasp in admiration of the dexterous slashes Zara had inflicted upon them.

He was that skilled a fighter, but he wasn't used to camping. Zara had even stared blankly when they tried to decide the watch order.

Adventurers who gathered in the countryside—and especially adventurers who took requests without going through the guild—almost always had some kind of guilty conscience. That should have been true for the boy, too, but his inexperience didn't make any sense.

Himatra thought maybe he was a noble or the pupil of a high-ranking knight, and he'd become an adventurer after his family fell to ruin. That would give him a reason to not want to show his adventurer medal. But that didn't fit, either, because Zara's equipment lacked the elegance of the nobility. He was also clearly accustomed to his tools. This boy could not have been new to adventuring.

He was great at masking his presence, and he never seemed to let his guard down, even when relaxing. That did not suggest a lifestyle in which he had been pampered by servants. Himatra found this imbalance very odd.

In truth, Zara wasn't totally unused to camping—he had experienced more than enough camping in the labyrinth. He had just never set up a campsite.

When he slept in the labyrinth, he didn't use a blanket or anything to make himself comfortable and instead only wrapped his sword in a pillow or coat. He didn't have to cut any weeds, and he rarely ever made a fire. If anything approached him, he had no choice but to deal with it himself. For that reason, his sleep was light and short.

In other words, it was because he was used to the harshness of camping solo that he had no experience setting up a large-scale campsite, and the idea of establishing a watch order had never occurred to him. He could also just use a potion to recover his stamina when in the labyrinth.

“Ha-ha-ha. Anyway, this smoked meat is delicious. I'm glad you joined us, Mr. Zara. This would go great with some wine.”

“Oh, come on, Gondy. It's your turn to be on watch tonight,” Himatra chided. Gondona was clearly the oldest in the group, but Himatra spoke to him quite casually.

“Gond. You can snack all you want, but lay off the booze,” said Borante, also addressing him casually.

“This meat is truly delicious. What animal is it from?” asked the White Princess, her plate bearing multiple slices of pink flesh.

A moment earlier, Zara had taken a large piece of meat that looked especially well smoked and offered some center cuts to the White Princess.

He had procured this meat in the Gahra Mountains, and everyone in the group ended up loving it.

“It's ettin meat.”

“I see,” said the White Princess with a wide grin.

Borante wore a thousand-yard stare. Himatra spat out her wine. Gondona brought out the next bottle.

Adventuring with a party is really fun.

Such were Zara's thoughts.

It rained the next day. After a discussion, they decided they should stay put for the time being and keep an eye on the situation.

The White Princess was in the carriage with her box. Zara was inside as well, acting as her guard.

It was a four-person carriage, but the interior was more spacious than usual. It was likely built to allow plenty of room for the box and to make it easy to get it in and out.

The box was currently seated next to the White Princess, and Zara was sitting across from her. As Zara looked at her face, he thought she seemed both youthful and mature at the same time.

The rain wasn't falling hard, but it was hitting the roof of the carriage without pause. The quiet atmosphere inside the carriage was giving Zara the sensation that he was somewhere not of this world.

"You're a strange person, Zara."

"Surely I'm not as strange as you."

"I feel the blessings of the goddess Bora from you."

"If you're the one saying that, it's probably true."

"Are you always alone?"

"I've always gone into labyrinths by myself. I've been surrounded by teachers and guides from a young age, though, so I was never truly alone. I left to travel by myself about three months ago."

"I see. I had a companion on my travels. But they grew old, fell ill, and died in that town. Truthfully, I was probably always alone... Long enough to forget what loneliness feels like, anyway."

"When did you part from the last White Princess?"

"Hmm-hmm. That is what the world says of me. I'm actually the one who spread the misconception that the name and duty of the White Princess have been passed down over generations. That has never been the case. It has always been me."

"So you've been the White Princess for over a thousand years?"

"Yes, that's right. But you do not seem very surprised. I was right. You are a strange person."

"Is it really okay to tell me such an important, long-kept secret?"

"My duty will soon be finished. The time is nigh," the White Princess said, looking at the box.

"It's said that this box is the source of your magic. Is it losing its power?"

"No, no. Nothing of the sort. It is finally time for what is being carried inside it to complete its journey. Watching over this box until then is the role I was given by my master. It has been a very, very long time."

“Have you had multiple companions over the years?”

“Yes. Humans have very short life spans. I can no longer remember how many attendants I’ve had. But they all served me well. Normally, I dismiss them once they reach a certain age and hire a new one.”

“But you didn’t do that this time.”

“Yes. Because the end is in sight.”

Zara was going to ask the White Princess what awaited them at the Ocean Temple, but he didn’t get a chance. The party suddenly found themselves surrounded by a horde of monsters that had been gradually approaching the campsite.

Zara moved to engage the enemies, but Borante stopped him before he made it out the door.

“No. Gondona asked us not to help. Stay in the carriage, Zara.”

Zara closed the door.

These enemies were trouble. They had surrounded the camp in massive numbers, but what really bothered Zara was the way they walked and the presence he felt from them. These monsters were probably...

“Turn Undead!!”

Gondona’s incantation echoed through the rainy forest, and an intense light flashed through the area.

The effect of the spell was severe.

Turn Undead was a skill commonly possessed by clergymen, and it was capable of driving away undead-type monsters. If used unskillfully, however, it could excite the enemy and dramatically increase their attack power. It did no damage to anything other than undead monsters, but it could be used to draw attention.

A certain adventurer monk said it was a skill used to lure weak enemies into one spot so they could be wiped out all at once. It was also said that as the skill increased in rank, it would become capable of inflicting major damage to nearby enemies as well. That didn’t begin to describe what had been cast a moment ago, however.

Zara could see everything clearly from the small window of the carriage.

The nearby ghouls were struck by bolts of lightning and evaporated. Farther away, the revenants were blasted backward and didn’t get up. They then melted into slush and were washed away by the rain.

There had probably been over one hundred of those repulsive creatures, but they were eradicated with one simple incantation.

“Gondy! So you *can* do more than just drink wine!”

“Gond! Didn’t you say you couldn’t use offensive magic?”

“Ha-ha-ha! That wasn’t offensive magic.”

“Then what was it?”

“Just the discipline of a clergyman. Shouting like that made me

hungry. Mr. Zara, would you happen to have any more of that smoked meat?"

5

The downpour became a light drizzle and subsided by the next morning. The party pressed on.

They hadn't made it very far when they were attacked by a group of twenty weaker undead monsters led by one resembling a leopard.

Borante engaged the boss. The leopard monster was bipedal and wielded a wide, curved sword.

For a while, the beast competed evenly with Borante's greatsword, but after he tossed a small bag into the air and cut it open, the monster's movements grew sluggish, and Borante slayed it easily.

Himatra burned the weaker undead monsters to a crisp with three Flame Bombs.

"What was in that small bag?"

"It was filled with wild peppers, which had been dried and crushed into powder."

"What kind of cowardly move is that? I thought you were a man."

"You shouldn't use fireballs in the middle of a forest."

"It just rained, so it's fine."

"Ha-ha-ha! I'm glad to see you two are becoming so close."

"Hey, Gondy! What the hell? Why are you drinking at noon?"

Later in the afternoon, they were attacked by around thirty more undead monsters. Their faces were fiendish, but they were only about as tall as children.

"I don't feel much magic power coming from them, so I'll be fine by myself. I'll make this quick."

Gondona watched as Himatra jumped out of the passenger's seat and then muttered to himself.

"Those are zafans. They're very strong against fire. They also attack using items, so their magic power is negligible."

Himatra let out a screech, after which Zara leaped from the carriage and beheaded the enemies in rapid succession. After returning to the carriage and discovering Gondona knew all about those monsters, she was furious with him.

"Why didn't you tell me? I had some of my hair singed off! Aaaaand you're drinking again. Didn't I just tell you not to start drinking at noon? You drunk monk! Anyway, what the hell were those little ghosts thinking, using fire magic in the middle of a forest?!"

"You're one to talk."

They went the rest of that day without being attacked again. The following day, however, they encountered a much nastier enemy.

“Is that a dullahan?”

“Sure looks like it. This is my first time seeing one.”

“Yep, that’s a dullahan.”

The group had started moving early that morning, but now, a giant horse was blocking their path. The horse was being ridden by a headless knight in full armor.

To be more precise, its head wasn’t on its shoulders. It was being cradled in its left arm. The knight held a naked longsword in its right hand. It was a weapon that would normally have been too big to wield with one hand, but the monster could swing it without issue.

“This one’s mine. I’ve always wanted to fight one of these,” said Borante, and he moved forward to engage it.

A duel between the dullahan with a longsword and Borante with his greatsword began. They both fought with finesse despite the weight of their blades. It was a sight to behold.

“Looks like it’s my turn,” Zara said.

He headed for the back of the carriage where one more dullahan had appeared. Another swordfight ensued. Both duels ended at nearly the same time, and in each, the human had emerged victorious.

But that wasn’t the end of it.

“Ah!” exclaimed Himatra.

“Hmph. I knew it,” said Gondona.

As soon as Borante defeated the dullahan, two more appeared from behind it. The same thing happened on Zara’s side, which meant the party was now being attacked by a quartet.

Borante remained focused. He rushed at the two dullahans and swiftly defeated them. Zara made short work of his opponents as well.

But afterward, twice as many appeared. Four were in front of Borante, and four squared off against Zara.

Gondona turned to Himatra, who was about to go to Borante’s aid.

“Sorry to ask this of you, Ms. Himatra, but can you please restrict the movement of the four up front? It doesn’t have to be for long. Get Borante to come back here while they’re being held back.”

“What? Tch. You have some kind of plan, right?” Himatra asked, but she followed Gondona’s orders.

When Borante returned to the carriage, Gondona told him to throw knives at all of the dullahans. He smeared liquid from a bottle onto each blade.

“This is holy water. It should prove quite useful against our undead adversaries.”

“Got it, Gond.”

The plan was just as effective as Gondona had hoped. The extremely

powerful dullahans vanished the moment they were pierced by the knives coated in holy water. Replacements stopped appearing as well.

Gondona turned around to help Zara, but he had already finished his off.

“Hooo. Impressive. You had a holy element weapon.”

Zara nodded. Gondona patted him on the shoulder and motioned for him to get into the carriage. Borante and Zara climbed inside, and then Gondona took the reins and had Himatra sit in the passenger’s seat next to him.

“That’s not fair! I just fought, too! ...Hey, how many times do I have to tell you not to drink? Give me that.”

Himatra took the bottle from Gondona, put it to her mouth, and heartily gulped down some wine.

They were attacked by undead monsters every day of their journey, but thanks to the unique talents of everyone in the party, they were able to drive them all away.

“Look, we’ve finally reached the edge of the forest.”

“Yeah. But first we have to deal with those.”

Four pitch-black clumps were squatting off in the vicinity. When the carriage approached, they stood up, each glaring at the group with three shining eyes apiece.

“What are those?”

“They’re bugbears.”

“Ah, that’s what those look like. Hey, Himatra, what are you...?”

Himatra finished an incantation and fired off a spell.

“Summon Comet!”

“Wha—? Don’t use that here!!!”

A comet came crashing down from the sky, annihilating the four bugbears. They were unlucky to have been huddled so close together.

What was formerly the edge of the forest was now a giant crater. The trees, grass, and dirt that had been kicked up rained down over the party. Luckily, the spell didn’t start a fire, and after a brief argument, the party left the forest.

6

“Ms. Himatra, please take this,” said Gondona.

“Huh? What is it?”

“It’s a medicinal herb that hastens the recovery of magic power. It can be boiled, and I also hear you can eat it raw. Chew it thoroughly and swallow its juice together with your saliva.”

“Sounds a little weird to me, but thanks. If it can hasten my

recovery even a little, I'll gladly take it."

"It's apparently very bitter."

Himatra tossed the herb into her mouth. A second later, she screwed up her face, but she didn't spit it out.

As soon as they left the forest, they were attacked by swarms of locust and fly monsters. It seemed the bosses of each swarm were called Adoban and Nasu, respectively. There was an impossible number of enemies.

Gondona created a barrier to protect their client and her box, Himatra cast fire spells relentlessly, Borante used explosives to take out any undead monsters that approached Himatra, and Zara killed the bosses and brought the battle to an end.

7

They made it to the ocean. There was a beach, and the bright-green water stretched as far as the eye could see.

The salty ocean breeze felt fresh, and their vitality seemed to improve with every breath.

This was the first time Zara had ever seen the ocean, and he was deeply moved. He was excited after hearing that the island off to the right was called Yuto Island. That was the hometown of the great sorcerer Gil Linx. Zara had been hearing anecdotes about Gil Linx's life ever since he was little, so the man's birthplace felt like a holy land.

The party continued their trip to the Ocean Temple. They weren't attacked by undead monsters for three whole days. At one point, they saved a traveling family from a pack of goblins.

They set up camp every day on a spot where they could feel the ocean breeze. The wine was delicious, and the fish were fresh. Himatra turned out to be a very good cook.

From then on, they were attacked by undead monsters many times, but none were very powerful. The strength of this party had much to do with how easily they got through those fights, however.

When they were about four or five days from the temple, the intensity of the attacks by undead monsters increased suddenly. They were frequently attacked while eating, and mental and physical exhaustion were beginning to set in.

"Everyone, listen up."

Borante addressed the party after they finished eating dinner.

"We are about two days from the temple. However, if we get moving early and really push the horses, it's not a distance we can't

cover in one day. What do you all say to trying to reach our goal by tomorrow?"

The three adventurers agreed, and the White Princess did as well. Everyone was confident this party could do it.

8

They departed well before morning. Unlike the forest, the area by the ocean didn't get pitch-black at night. The attacks of the undead were fierce, but the party repelled them all, not letting them slow the carriage's advance.

"Damn... There's one medium-sized monster in the middle of the road up ahead."

"I'll take care of it! Please don't slow the carriage."

Zara jumped out and sprinted ahead. He quickly severed the undead monster's legs and kicked it off the road. The carriage grazed the unholy creature as it passed.

Zara caught up to the carriage from behind. Gondona opened the door with excellent timing and let him in.

"Nice work, boy."

Borante gave an impressed whistle from the coachman's seat.

9

They continued their hurried advance while eating some food they'd brought with them to satisfy their hunger. A few hours past noon, Borante called out.

"I see it!"

Zara pushed open the door and looked ahead. The road traveling along the ocean led to a steep cape. On top of the cape was a grand building.

That's the Ocean Temple.

"White Princess. We can see the temple. We're almost there," Zara said after shutting the door.

They were close, but everyone was deeply exhausted from how hard they had been pushing themselves. Gondona was able to fix up any injuries with his formidable healing ability, but their mental and physical fatigue were high as could be. Himatra, who had been firing off long-distance attacks without pause, was especially spent.

"Mr. Zara, I want to form a party," said Gondona.

Zara was puzzled.

It was common to form an official party when exploring a labyrinth. It enabled experience points to be distributed evenly and made fighting easier, so it seemed like the obvious thing to do. There were many cases where life and death depended on everyone in the party knowing their proper positions and managing their stamina properly.

However, forming an official party outside of labyrinths was rare. It usually held no meaning and required that everyone reveal their real name and remaining stamina. It wasn't something Zara wanted to do.

He didn't understand why Gondona would suddenly say such a thing at that moment. However, he did as he was asked and formed a party with himself as the leader.

He then bent forward into the passenger's seat and explained what they were doing to Borante and Himatra. He touched his adventurer medal to each of theirs and brought them into the party.

A thought occurred to Zara after he returned to the carriage:

This monk has probably spent most of his time in labyrinths.

While exploring a labyrinth, monks were in charge of managing the party's stamina. The incredible stamina-recovery techniques used in labyrinths were impossible to execute in the outside world, however, meaning it fell to each person to manage their own.

Zara's thinking was interrupted when the carriage suddenly tilted to one side.

"Shit. We were rammed. The front right wheel is gone. Sorry, guys. I'm gonna cut the horses loose," said Borante.

The carriage was carried forward by its momentum, clattering loudly as it swayed left and right. It then lurched hard to the left and flipped over multiple times before it came to a stop upside down.

Zara displayed incredibly quick reflexes by grabbing the White Princess, kicking open the door, and escaping from the conveyance while it was still rolling. It looked like Borante also managed to successfully jump out of the carriage, but Himatra was thrown out, landing face-first onto the sandy beach.

The White Princess had fainted in Zara's arms out of shock. That was not surprising, as she had been using Invisible Hands throughout that entire tense situation.

Himatra was groaning.

Zara laid the White Princess gently down on the sand and then heard Gondona call out to him.

"Mr. Zara, please hold back those monsters for a bit!"

Blood was streaming from Gondona's forehead.

Zara's attention had already been fixed on the enemies before Gondona said anything. He slayed them one after another.

When he caught sight of Gondona, he saw that the monk was

praying with his head down and his knees in the sand. He was holding ritual implements, or possibly sacred seals, in his hands.

Borante was trying to treat Himatra when the two of them and Zara were enveloped in a gentle light.

Ah, I see. This is a level-up.

Zara finally realized something. Gondona was likely a clergyman with the Oath skill. That meant that if they were in the same party as him or if he had their adventurer medals, he could petition the gods to level them up. They must have earned enough experience points to gain a level during all the intense battles they had endured on their journey. Thanks to the level-up, their injuries were healed and their stamina and mental energy were restored.

“Gondy, that was amazing.”

“You’re a lifesaver, Gond.”

Borante and Himatra quickly resumed fighting, but Zara noticed something. Gondona’s injury on his forehead was still there. He had not leveled up.

How has he not leveled up after all those battles? Just who is this monk?

“Where’s the box? Where’s the box?!”

It was the White Princess. She had woken up.

The impact from the carriage toppling over had thrown its cargo out the door. Fortunately, it had landed on the beach, so it didn’t break completely. There were, however, some cracks through which Zara could see something white.

The White Princess rushed over to the box and inspected it.

“It’s started. But this spot should be okay,” she said as if to herself, looking at both the box and the temple on the cape. She then called out to the party.

“Everyone, the preparation of the contents inside this box will soon be complete. It cannot be moved right now. Please protect it until the task is done.”

“Understood.”

“Leave it to us.”

“You got it.”

“Ho-ho-ho. I’m ready.”

Creatures that looked like mermen emerged from the water all across the shore. They then began appearing farther and farther back, emerging from the waves one after another. They were sahagins.

The final battle had begun.

“Sanctuary!”

Gondona’s voice reverberated as he cast a spell. The box and the White Princess, who was praying in front of it, were surrounded by a semitransparent protective wall.

His voice is nice and deep.

“Blessing!”

Himatra’s eyes lit up in fury. She looked like she wanted nothing more than to hurl insults at Gondona. There was a perfectly understandable reason for her rage—he had cast Blessing on himself.

Blessing was an excellent support spell that dramatically raised physical defense. Its drawback, however, was that it only lasted for a very short amount of time. Boss battles in labyrinths were one thing, but there wasn’t much point in using it during long battles against many enemies.

If you were going to use it, though, it would have made sense to cast it on someone risking their neck by fighting in the vanguard or on a sorcerer with low physical defense. A monk hanging back from the front lines using it on himself appeared cowardly and selfish. It was only natural to be angry with someone for using magic power on something wasteful like that instead of on healing.

Her anger, however, quickly gave way to shock.

“Blessing! Blessing! Blessing!”

Gondona cast Blessing four consecutive times. Borante, Zara, and Himatra were all enveloped in the blue phosphorescent light that signified the support spell.

All three of them were dumbfounded. It took him no time at all to perform those incantations.

He’s preparing the next incantation in his mind as he casts each spell.

Zara got chills. He had heard there were sorcerers who could do that sort of thing, but this was the first time he had actually seen it. But his surprise didn’t end there.

“Repel Evil! Repel Evil! Repel Evil! Repel Evil!”

Starting with himself, Gondona once again cast spells on all four of them. A faint orange light appeared just outside of the blue aura already surrounding them.

“What is this?” asked Zara. He was unfamiliar with this spell.

“A technique to drive evil away. It provides a strong boost to physical attacks against dark- and demon-element monsters. Physical defense against dark-element attacks is also increased. You also have higher resistance to status ailments. Okay, let’s go.”

“Huh?”

The three of them still in shock, Gondona turned his back on his companions and rushed headlong at the sahagins, swinging a large mace as he ran. He knocked three enemies into the air, where they

burst and died.

The sahagins were enraged, and they surrounded Gondona. He then began to swing his mace indiscriminately, every swing sending multiple foes into the air, where they all exploded.

Sahagins were enemies that not even an A-rank swordsman should have been able to defeat in a single blow.

What am I witnessing right now?

Now wasn't the time for those kinds of thoughts. Zara, Borante, and Himatra were being surrounded as well. They had no chance of protecting the horses, so they struck them each on the rear to chase them away before charging into battle.

Zara was surprised yet again. He was cutting through the sahagins like butter with only light swings of his sword. Because he was dealing massive damage to them without even having to aim for vital points, most died in one hit. He didn't need any technique or strength. Just swinging his sword was enough.

His defense had also been increased tremendously, to the point where a direct attack didn't do any damage to him. In a melee like this, that was the best support one could receive.

I can't believe we're able to fight so calmly while surrounded by this many enemies.

Considering how powerful the buff was, it was amazing it was still active. Blessing, as well as the spell with the orange light, should have run out a long time ago.

Just when Zara was thinking the spells were lasting impossibly long, he heard Gondona once again cast Blessing and the orange spell four consecutive times.

Zara then realized why Gondona was casting the spells on himself first. When the support spells cast on himself expired, that meant the rest of the party's support would expire, too. That gave him an easy indicator for when to recast the spells. In other words, he was using this method to ensure there would be no gaps. He probably intentionally cast the spells on himself to expire slightly before the rest of the party.

Wait. Isn't support magic supposed to be impossible to cast unless your target is right next to you?

He had heard that Blessing could not be cast unless you were literally within breathing distance of the person you were casting it on. Also, even the smallest obstruction between caster and target should have rendered it impossible.

How is he able to cast this support while several meters away from us, in the middle of such an intense battle?

Zara didn't really understand, but being in a party likely had something to do with it.

So this is what support is capable of.

The White Princess was still facing her box and praying. A faint light was flickering from within, gradually coming more quickly and becoming more intense.

Zara didn't feel like the number of enemies had decreased at all, but they were doing a good job of killing all that approached them.

Eventually, they all fell into clear roles.

Zara gathered enemies together with hit-and-run attacks.

Borante was suppressing assailants over a wide range by using a morning star with a chain in addition to throwing weapons such as explosives and the daggers that returned to his hands after slaying his enemies.

Himatra was casting long-distance magic attacks to try to hinder the enemy's advance, and she would occasionally use a large-scale strike to clean up clusters of enemies that Zara had assembled.

Gondona maintained support and protected Himatra while crushing any enemies that slipped through the party.

Their defense had been raised significantly, but they still suffered some damage.

Whenever injuries piled up and their movement became sluggish, Gondona would call out...

"Heal!"

...and they would recover. His spells were effective from a ridiculously long range.

If this is the benefit of forming a party, then joining one is well worth revealing my information.

The sahagins were still appearing at the same rate, but the defense had the battle under control.

We can do this.

Zara's hope didn't last for long, however, before something appeared to crush it.

Far beyond the water's edge, the ocean parted, and a giant figure rose up.

It was Dagon, a creature said to be the god of the undead monsters in the ocean.

Dark clouds blanketed the sky, painting the waters a dull gray.

The god slowly advanced toward the shore, forcing its way through the sea and sky.

Zara, Borante, and Himatra all felt despair. Gondona then called out to them in a powerful voice:

"Everyone, over here!"

Unable to stop fighting for even a second, they shrunk their defensive perimeter to move toward Gondona and listened to his words.

“That is a demon god. I know a spell I think would be very effective against it. I don’t think I can kill it, but I can probably render it immobile for a bit. The incantation takes quite a while to prepare, however. During that time, I won’t be able to use Blessing or Heal. I’ll be completely defenseless. Sanctuary will probably expire partway through. Can I count on you three to protect me?”

Gondona knew a powerful spell that could turn this hopeless situation around, and he was asking them to protect him while he readied it.

They wanted to do as he said, but the reason they had lasted this long was because of his powerful defensive and recovery magic. They were also on the brink of total exhaustion already. By asking them to fight without support magic, he may as well have been asking them to sacrifice a limb—or even their lives.

No, wait. I can use that.

“Understood. Borante, Himatra! I have a request. Can you buy me enough time to pull out an item?”

They had no way of knowing what Zara was trying to do, but they answered right away.

“You got it!” said Himatra.

“You can count on me!” followed Borante.

Borante increased his intensity and pushed back the incoming sahgins. Himatra peppered nearby enemies with small, rapid-fire spells. They wouldn’t be able to keep up that pace for very long, but they were giving Zara the time he needed.

Zara opened up his Treasury. Doors made of blue light appeared opposite his open hand and then opened to the left and right. He did a quick search and pulled out a sword.

Borante caught sight of his Treasury out of the corner of his eye. He had already noticed that Zara had one, but this was the first time he had been in a position where he could see the operation screen.

Look at the size of that Treasury, the width of the screen, the complexity... That’s got to belong to a royal family or the head of a major noble house. Just who is this boy?

Zara closed the Treasury and rushed forward, quickly wiping out the approaching sahgins. The speed at which he ran and swung his weapon made him seem like a completely different person.

“I will drive back the enemies. Borante, please protect Himatra and Gondona. Himatra, please use only long-range spells!”

The two of them couldn't do anything other than stay quiet and follow orders. That was how abnormal Zara's strength and movement were in that moment.

The sword Zara was using was called Bora's Sword, and its blessings were tremendous.

Attack Power × 3

Critical-Hit Rate up 20%

Movement Speed up 80%

Attack Speed up 80%

Health Leech up 10%

Mana Regen up 20%

Basic Stats up 60%

Automatic Damage Recovery

Every one of those blessings functioned outside of labyrinths. Zara had inherited this divine sword from his father. He had used it in the labyrinth before, but this was his first time wielding it in the outside world.

Its power was too much for a human to handle, so the consequences for using it were harsh. His father had actually died from overuse of Bora's Sword.

If you filled a leather bag to one hundred times its capacity, used it up, and then filled it with the same amount again, the bag would eventually get worn out and break. For that reason, Zara had forbidden himself from using this weapon in the outside world. Right now, though, he was lifting that restriction.

His speed had increased so much that the enemies may as well have not been moving at all. His strength became so great that they would go flying from a simple swing of his sword. The blade also instantly healed any injuries he sustained.

Zara was laying waste to the enemy. The very small number of monsters that did manage to get past him were dealt with easily by Borante and Himatra, despite their total exhaustion.

As the battle raged on, Dagon slowly but surely advanced toward the shore. Gondona was still performing his incantation.

The closer Dagon got, the more apparent its humongous size became, and the more intimidating it appeared. Its force was so great that Zara wondered if he had any chance of beating it. When it was about to step onto the shore, scattering miasma as it walked, the spell they had been waiting for finally arrived.

“Conviction Hammer!!!”

Beams of light from high in the sky tore through the clouds and fell into the ocean. A vortex of light expanded and swallowed up the clouds, and in the center of it appeared a giant hammer, also made of light.

The hammer aimed for Dagon's head, increasing in speed and scattering rainbow-hued fragments as it fell. The hammer was larger than the beast itself. It hit Dagon square on the head, creating a visual spectacle of richly colored light and striking a harmonious note that sounded like it came from a divine organ.

The adventurers forgot about the battle entirely as they watched the mythical scene play out.

Dagon swayed violently, smoke rising from its body, eventually falling backward and sending up a giant splash of water.

The sahagins that had covered every inch of the beach were hit with the aftermath of the light hammer's blow and were blasted through the air, dying instantly. New sahagins stopped appearing, probably because Dagon had been defeated.

We did it.

Borante and Himatra collapsed, having lost power in their limbs. They had both hit their limits physically and mentally. Even Zara felt like he was going to collapse.

But he didn't. He wasn't able to. The pain caused from the aftermath of borrowing the divine sword's power was so great, he couldn't even faint. In a labyrinth, he could have just used a potion to heal the pain, but that wouldn't work now.

D-did Father always endure this much pain when he used Bora's Sword?!

Gondona was facedown in the sand, having also collapsed after casting that enormous spell. Zara wondered how much the priest was going to pay for pushing himself so hard.

Silence suddenly fell upon the beach. Zara heard nothing but the crashing of the waves. The sky was totally clear, as if the gray clouds had been driven away by the heavenly magic. Hints of red light signified the coming of evening.

The White Princess then called out:

"It's hatching!"

12

The box burst apart and revealed a small white dragon.

A dragon.

Dragons were godly creatures that only appeared in tales of old. It was thought that seeing such a being in the current era was impossible

(not counting the monsters in labyrinths that were referred to as dragons, which lacked even a shred of divinity).

But now there was a genuine dragon right in front of them.

The mysterious creature directed its innocent gaze at Zara, the blue of the sky and the red of the evening sun reflecting off its body. Its length was comparable to that of a twelve- or thirteen-year-old human child. It floated in midair, singing happily.

“Kwee! Kwee-kwee!”

Its head and abdomen were covered in scales that shined like pearls. Its back had bluish scales with a slightly hard texture. Its transparent wings were small, and it occasionally flapped them as if just remembering it had them. The reason it was able to fly despite being inexperienced with its wings was due to a special skill it possessed from birth.

Zara heard a thud. The White Princess had collapsed.

Zara ran over to her unsteadily. His body felt heavy and was wracked with pain. It was as if he were carrying a lump of metal on his back while wading through a dense swamp.

The other adventurers were still unconscious.

“Thank you very much. I was able to safely fulfill my duty. Please take this,” said the White Princess. Lying faceup on the ground, she presented him four jewels.

This was the promised reward. The stone he’d accepted before was extremely valuable, but he couldn’t even imagine what kind of prices these jewels would fetch. This reward was what this colorful group of adventurers had put their lives on the line for.

“Zara. I have something to ask of you.”

“What is it, Princess?”

“I would like you to name this dragon child.”

“I had no idea dragons still existed in the world.”

“Most dragons disappeared long ago. This child may very well be the last.”

“You were entrusted with this dragon egg by the person you served, right?”

“Yes. This is the first and last child of my mistress, Kaldan, and her honored husband. Lady Kaldan entrusted it to me. I am Paksalimana, a water spirit who served Lady Kaldan.”

“If you served the dragon god Kaldan, that means you should know Narillia.”

“Narillia! That name takes me back... She was so lovely. However did you come to hear of her?”

Zara gave her the gist of what had happened.

“Ah, so Narillia met someone dear to her, and they are living happily together. She is even finding joy in helping people. That is

such good news. It is wonderful that I will be able to convey this news to Lady Kaldan. Thank you very much, Zara.”

The White Princess did not shed a tear—her body was already made of tears.

“Was the goddess Kaldan’s husband also a dragon?”

“No. Her husband was a human. He was a sorcerer of rare skill and one of the best dungeon makers in history.”

Zara noticed the Ocean Temple was emitting a faint illumination. It looked like the light was descending upon the newborn baby dragon.

“Why is the temple shining?” Zara muttered, and the White Princess answered.

“That temple is currently called the Ocean Temple, but originally, it was the Dragon Temple. The countries to which Lady Kaldan once gave her divine protection were in the vicinity of where the capital of the Gorenza Empire is today. After they were attacked by countries jealous of their prosperity, Lady Kaldan searched for a land where she could live in peace, and this is where she ended up. Eventually, people who served Lady Kaldan found their way here, and this temple was constructed.”

Narillia had said the goddess Olgoria became jealous of Kaldan’s beauty and popularity, so she’d made her out to be a wicked dragon and instigated the surrounding countries to attack and ruin the places under Kaldan’s safeguard. Kaldan had apparently come here afterward.

“Thanks to the deep faith of her people, this temple has a very strong protective power to this day. It is also imbued with the protection of Kaldan’s father and mother, the god of the heavens and the goddess of the earth, respectively. However, this land eventually became unsafe as well. Lady Kaldan said her child would perish along with her if they were together, so she entrusted the egg to me. She then left for the north with her husband, where their lives came to an end.”

Baldemost Kingdom was founded after the killing of Kaldan. As a descendant of the nobility of that country, Zara couldn’t help but feel pain in his heart as he listened to Paksalimana’s story.

“Among all the gods, Lady Kaldan subjugated the most undead monsters that brought pain and suffering to people. The malice of the undead runs deep, and Lady Kaldan’s scent coming off the egg made them consider it their sworn enemy. That is why for the last thousand years I have been continuously using magic to hide its presence. However, as time passed and the birth grew near, it became impossible for me to conceal the overflowing divine energy, and the undead began to attack. In order to drive them away, Lady Kaldan directed heroes of the modern era to my side. Even if you yourself

have not noticed it, you and the others have formed a bond with Lady Kaldan.”

The White Princess’s body was becoming increasingly transparent, and her voice grew faint. She was probably at the end of her life. The baby dragon watched the White Princess with its adorable round eyes, occasionally looking inquisitively at Zara.

“The dragon child will be able to grow up safely in this land. Its divine spirit is already serving as a light that destroys undead monsters. As a result of its birth, the divine protection in the temple, courtesy of the god of the heavens and the goddess of the earth, has also been restored. All is well. All my promises have been fulfilled.”

After delivering those final words, the White Princess’s body turned into water, which disappeared as it was absorbed into the sand. Some of the liquid touched Zara on its way down, healing all his pain. An unbearable wave of exhaustion then caused him to pass out.

The baby dragon, with its body glowing red from the light of the setting sun, was left alone with the sound of the wind and the ocean waves.

Interlude 4

While the hydra was in the air, the minotaur activated skills that increased its attack power and attack speed. The minotaur then adjusted its position, and before the hydra's large body fell, it cut off the monster's front left leg from the inside and leaped.

KA-THOOOOOOOOOOM!

The ground shook violently as the hydra landed and fell over sideways. Losing its left leg had thrown off its balance.

The minotaur touched down, ran across the still-shaking rock floor, approached the hydra, and quickly sliced through its dark-brown abdomen.

Unlike with basilisks, the underbellies of hydras were extremely hard, but there were a number of spots where it was comparatively easy for a blade to cut through. The minotaur had accurately stabbed its sword through an extremely narrow section. It then shoved its right hand through the gap, ripped out the beast's heart, and ate it.

The hydra, which had been trying to use its heads and three remaining legs to pick itself back up, died instantly.

A hydra's heart was the foundation of its immortality, and it would not die even if its heart was removed. Cutting up the heart would also do nothing, as it would soon heal itself. The heart was indestructible in this way. For this reason, humans considered attacking the heart pointless.

However, if you ate the heart *whole* instead of slicing it up, the hydra would die. Long ago, it was common for clans of dragons and giants to kill hydras by devouring their hearts.

But humans of the modern era were not aware of this, and the minotaur had not been taught the method by anyone, either. It simply felt a great power from the hydra's heart and decided it wanted to try and eat it. When it did so, the hydra died. That was how the minotaur learned of this technique.

After the hydra died, a clump of dark-red meat the size of a child's

fist was left behind. The minotaur picked it up and placed it in its Bag.

It was a valuable item called immortal flesh. Aboveground, it was used to make powerful recovery medicine. It was said to cure sick people on the verge of death and return youth to the old. Its effects were not permanent, but it was tremendously popular among wealthy elderly people.

Also, because it was used as an ingredient for medicine made to restore youth and increase vitality, large sums of money and personal connections could be gained by selling it to women in the imperial palace.

Unless they were strapped for money, though, adventurers who obtained this delicacy did not sell it. The reason for that was because, if consumed in a labyrinth, immortal flesh would have the temporary effect of both instantly restoring any lost body parts and protecting you from lethal damage. Adventurers called that the immortal effect.

The immortal effect lasted for a very short amount of time, but it served as a final trump card for adventurers fighting on the bottom floor of the labyrinth.

The minotaur left the stone room. Its mood had not improved. Sure enough, no matter how many hydras it killed, it would gain nothing. It would find no joy from that kind of battle.

The metal dragon was a much better opponent. It was two or three times bigger than the hydras. Its three heads had two horns each, which it used to manipulate wind, water, and more. It could also create shock waves and had both extremely hot and cold breath.

It would spread its semitransparent wings, which glowed with blue phosphorescent light, and fly around the spacious boss room raining down lightning from its three tails.

Its scales were harder than hydra scales, and its resistance to magic and physical attacks was astronomical. To top it all off, it had high intellect, which allowed it to read the actions of its opponent.

At first, the minotaur had absolutely no idea how to defeat it. If it were to fight the metal dragon now, however, even that battle would leave it feeling hollow.

Give me a strong enemy.

A strong enemy that will make me suffer.

A strong enemy that will give me the strength to kill that human.

That was what the minotaur wanted more than anything. Its hunger for a good battle became a boiling stream that coursed throughout its body and felt like it would erupt through the pores of its skin.

What the minotaur did not know was that its wish was in the process of being granted.

Chapter 15

The Ghost of the Elstoran Labyrinth

1

The first one to open his eyes was the monk Gondona. It was just before dawn.

A little bit later, Zara, Borante, and Himatra all woke up at around the same time. Surprisingly, Zara felt no pain. He felt refreshed and full of energy.

When he checked his adventurer medal, he saw that his level had become 79. The level-up before the battle had raised him to level 72, but he'd gone up seven whole levels after that. He did kill an enormous number of enemies, but even then, there was no reason for him to have gained so many levels. This kind of thing had been happening a lot lately.

"Gondona. I thought level-ups occurred after obtaining experience points from slain monsters. Is that wrong?"

"Hmm. From the practical understanding of adventurers, that is a very clear and easy way to think about it. You're not incorrect. But if we were to get more into the true nature of it, a level-up is a phenomenon that shows the gratitude of the gods toward living creatures."

"The gratitude of the gods? I don't really understand."

"Let's imagine a man who sells steamed buns for a living. He assigns a price to each bun and sells them. However, if his cute granddaughter were to come along, he might give her a steamed bun without taking any money."

"I can see that."

"If that cute granddaughter of his was drowning in a river and someone saved her, he would probably shower whoever saved her with heaps of free buns."

"The steamed-bun seller is the gods, and the buns are experience points?"

“Very good. They decide how many experience points each monster is worth, and they decide how many experience points it takes to reach each level. That would be similar to deciding the price of a steamed bun. The price and the compensation always appear to be in balance, so people think of it as a law. However, there is no actual proof of that. There may even be cases where the steamed bun seller is angry with a customer’s attitude and refuses to sell them anything. He would probably close down the shop.”

“If that’s true, then how did level-ups come to work like buying buns?”

“That I don’t know. Maybe the gods bestowed them upon humans as blessings. Maybe humans asked for them, and the gods granted their wishes. However they came about, they in some way fulfill the wishes of the gods.”

“Did I save a grandchild of the gods somewhere?”

“You probably did. Sometimes there are matters the gods want settled but can’t accomplish with their power alone, so they implore humans to act for them. To the gods, those who carry out their will in these cases are like the person who saved the steamed-bun seller’s granddaughter. The gods are thankful to that individual, and that gratitude is realized as a blessing in the form of experience points. If activated from the gods’ side, a level-up can occur without the need for a petition.”

“I see. Now that you say that, a number of things make sense.”

It seemed Borante and Himatra had also received major level-ups, so they listened to the conversation with great interest. But their interest only went so far.

“That’s enough about level-ups. Tell me what happened after I fainted,” Himatra asked Zara. She then caught sight of the white baby dragon.

“N-no way... Was this in the...?”

“This is thought to be the last dragon in the world.”

Borante and Himatra circled around the floating dragon to observe it. The dragon stared back at them and, finding this fun, flew one quick lap around them. Borante and Himatra tried again to walk around it. They then began circling one another until Himatra tripped over herself and fell.

The baby dragon squeaked happily and did a victory dance in the air above Himatra.

The morning sun rose over the calm beach.

Zara communicated everything that had happened after they collapsed as accurately as he could. Afterward, the group made a grave for the White Princess. They offered a prayer in front of it and then divided the reward among themselves.

“Gondona. Paksalimana asked me to name the dragon, but I can’t think of one.”

“I see. I don’t think there is any set way to do this, but let’s imitate the naming ceremony of a king’s eldest child. Okay, everyone hold out an offering.”

Gondona made a splendid altar using the materials he had on hand.

“Let’s get started.”

When Gondona produced a holy garment and put it on, everyone was shocked into silence.

“A—a cardinal uniform?”

“G-Gondy, you’ve gotta be...”

That was how they found out Gondona was not a monk but a priest.

Priests served a god or multiple gods by performing rituals, and monks served at temples by performing training and aid according to teachings. There were ranks among temples but none among monks themselves. Priests, on the other hand, were divided between the ranks of apprentice priest, parish priest, deacon, priest, bishop, and cardinal, from lowest to highest.

Zara had thought Gondona’s skills resembled those of a priest, but because he didn’t use a book of prayer or a staff, Zara’d assumed he must actually have been a monk.

The christening ceremony proceeded under Gondona’s guidance, and Zara named the baby dragon Freya. That was a word that meant treasure in an old language from the southern part of the continent. Gondona said the dragon was a girl, so Zara wanted to pick a fitting name. The group raised their hands to the sky to declare witness to the naming and celebrated.

They then held a banquet using the ingredients and alcohol they had used as offerings. They drank alcohol they hadn’t offered, too.

Previously unaware that Gondona was a clergyman of the highest possible rank, Himatra began referring to him with an honorific title.

“Pass me that meat, Father Gondy. Oh, and the wine, too. No, not like that! Give me the whole bottle. As expected of a cardinal. This wine is soooo good. Ten more of those please, Father!”

She still didn’t speak respectfully, however.

It seemed that Borante used to be a knight of decently high rank in a certain country, and he’d objected to a decision his superior had made while they were at war. After a great fuss that had ended with the injury of his superior, he’d fled.

Himatra said she’d been an apprentice sorcerer at the imperial court

of a certain country, but after a superior had tried to rape her, she'd burned him to ash and fled.

Zara told them he had inherited a parent's dying wish and was now traveling to broaden his horizons and become strong enough to defeat a powerful enemy.

Gondona did not talk about his past, but it seemed like the design of his priest garb during the ceremony gave Borante and Himatra an idea of where he came from.

After that, they talked about what they were going to do next. Gondona said he was going to the Ocean Temple. He would take the dragon child with him.

Borante and Himatra planned to return to the town from which the four of them had departed with the White Princess. Borante said he had some people to whom he wanted to boast about his accomplishments so he could shut them up once and for all.

Zara said he wanted to take a look at the homeland of Gil Linx and then head south.

"Come on, man. Just because you have some money now doesn't make it okay for you to smoke cigars."

"You're the last person I want to hear that from."

Himatra cast a spell to increase her physical strength, picked up Gondona's mace, and used it to knock Borante down.

The mace hit Borante hard and threw him to the ground, but puzzlingly, he took almost no damage. No one pointed out the fact that Himatra had used support magic, despite saying earlier that she couldn't.

The baby dragon seemed to take a great liking to the smoked ettin meat. Gondona discovered the meat turned into a delicacy when the dragon warmed the thoroughly smoked, hardened edges with its breath.

It turned out to be a very fun night.

3

The group split up the next morning.

First, Borante and Himatra departed with the two horses. The horses had run into a forest not far from the beach and returned after Borante whistled. Once their figures disappeared over the mountain pass, Gondona spoke.

"My level actually had increased as well when I woke up. And that wasn't all. I surrendered half my life span when I used Conviction Hammer, but this morning, it seemed that rather than being halved,

my life span had slightly increased. I must have received quite a large steamed bun.”

By half his life span? Does he mean half his remaining life span? Or half his entire life span? Can you actually see your own life span in the first place?

Zara was dubious of what he had just heard but decided not to question it. He was scared of what kind of ridiculous answer he might receive.

At first, the baby dragon did not leave Zara’s side. Once Zara passed all the smoked meat he was holding to Gondona, however, the baby dragon stuck close to the cardinal.

“I am going to spend some time praying in the temple. I will pray for you as well, Mr. Zara. Blessed be the gods. I wish you the best of luck on your journey, young adventurer.”

Zara bowed his head to receive a blessing and then departed. He took a deeply moving trip to Yuto Island, then returned to the continent and headed south on the peninsula along the sea.

After saving a caravan of merchants besieged by monsters, he agreed to become their escort. He tried to go his own way when they reached Aldana, but the head of the caravan asked him to stay until they reached the Holy Kingdom of Roahl. He said there were a lot of pirates in the area.

Zara had not planned to go to Roahl. It was a religious state located within Aldana that was allowed to operate as a small independent country. It housed several temples that were exalted by many countries, so it was seen as a holy land throughout the continent.

However, there were rumors of secularized priests instigating violence and also of power struggles between temples that worshipped different gods, so Zara didn’t particularly feel like entering the country.

Another reason he didn’t want to go to Roahl was the strict immigration check. Still, he had nothing to hide. He decided he would deliver the caravan as far as the checkpoint.

The checkpoint was a giant stronghold. Enormous walls surrounded it, and it was said there was a town immediately on the opposite side.

Zara thought about leaving once he saw the long line at immigration, but he felt that, after coming all this way, he may as well take a look at the town. In the end, he got in line.

They waited for a long time before it was their turn for inspection. The official who performed his inspection cried out once he checked his adventurer medal.

“Oooh, you’re an S-rank adventurer! Welcome to the Holy Kingdom of Roahl. In the name of the gods and of the hierarchy, we are honored by your visit. Gods be praised.”

Zara had attracted the stares of everyone around him. Even the head of the merchant caravan he escorted opened his eyes wide in astonishment.

Things got rough for Zara from there.

He tried to accept his reward and take his leave, but the head of the caravan was persistent in trying to get him to sign an exclusive contract to become their escort. After Zara refused, the merchant offered to pay for his lodging for the night, but the adventurer refused that as well and said he would look for a guide.

It wasn't just the head of the caravan. Zara was hounded by a great variety of people, every one of them trying to butter him up and form some kind of relationship.

"I'm going to the Adventurers Guild, so if you have business with me, take it there."

After saying that, he somehow managed to make his escape. He shook off the crowds of people offering to show him around and arrived at the guild. Things got even worse for him there.

Saying he was going to the Adventurers Guild had simply been an excuse to get rid of the people swarming him, but now that he was here, he decided to see what kind of labyrinth there was in Roahl. When he requested information, he was asked to present his adventurer medal.

The employee was startled when he appraised Zara's medal, leaving his seat for a while and returning with the president of the guild.

The president asked Zara to list his achievements in detail. Zara said he'd spent time adventuring in the Sazardon Labyrinth of the Baldemost Kingdom before deciding to go on a journey. He told the president he had taken a number of requests after leaving on his trip but declined to give details, citing client privacy.

It was perfectly understandable the guild president would show such strong interest in Zara.

To an Adventurers Guild, an S-rank adventurer was the most valuable commodity they could have and a trump card that allowed them to reject any interference that threatened their high level of independence. As such, they knew the whereabouts of their S-rank adventurers, and in high-priority cases, it was practically the guild's duty to act as mediator for S-rank adventurers and protect their rights even if it meant negotiating against a country.

Whenever a new adventurer rose to rank S, that person was immediately bombarded by the guilds of that country and other influential people. Despite that, an S-rank adventurer had just wandered into this guild in Roahl by himself. His level was 79, and he was shockingly young; only sixteen years of age. To top it all off, rather than working for any kind of organization, he was on a trip to

better himself. The guild president decided he would do whatever it took to tie this young man down.

He prevented Zara from leaving under the pretense of having to check urgent matters, then behind the scenes ordered his quick-witted employees to prepare alcohol, lodging, women, tourist information, attractive jobs, positions of high social rank, highly potent weapons, and anything else they could think of to try to win over this golden goose. Zara turned him down and left the reception room, ignoring the president's attempts to detain him.

At that point, he once again found himself in a very uncomfortable situation.

The lobby was filled to capacity, teeming with people who had all manner of requests for Zara. Adventurers, merchants, and government officials all surrounded him and tried to chat him up, wanting to get close to this young S-rank adventurer who had arrived in Roahl without warning, like a shooting star.

People pulled on his hands and body. Others grabbed his hair. Before he knew it, he was robbed of his jacket, his hair was disheveled, and he was covered with numerous scratches and bruises.

If I was surrounded by sahadins, I'd just be able to cut my way through them. How am I supposed to deal with people?

Zara had only ever focused on training, so his interpersonal skills were unpolished. Also, having been born a high-ranking noble, he had no experience being swarmed by crowds of people and having requests and questions relentlessly shoved at him like this. Zara felt like he was being mobbed. The overwhelming hurricane of words and the close proximity of the crowd were beginning to make him feel like he might lose consciousness.

Aah... I feel like...I was stung by...a poison bee...

Adventurers who could easily defeat a level 50 monster would occasionally die after being swarmed by a hoard of level 5 or 6 insect or reptile monsters. Even if the poison of each individual monster wasn't very strong, a person could be greatly hurt if swamped and stung in quick succession.

"I'm going to the labyrinth; would you like to come with me?"

Zara quickly grabbed the hand of the person who'd said that.

"Yes, please! Let's go to the labyrinth!"

"Let's get out of here first," his savior yelled. Doing as he said, Zara pushed his way through the crowd and left the guild.

With the plan of action decided, all that remained was the execution. One effective combat technique when surrounded by a maelstrom of advancing enemies was to push and pull in order to create a thin line, which you could then quickly slip through.

The young man who'd invited him to enter the labyrinth had also

emerged from the guild.

“This way!”

He was quick-witted and agile. He was probably a scout. The two of them ran down the street, slipped through alleyways, jumped up walls, and climbed onto roofs, eventually shaking off their pursuers.

“Man, you really are good. You kept up with me easily.”

Slightly out of breath and wiping away sweat, the man held out his hand.

“I’m Poriapul. Nice to meet you.”

They shook hands.

4

The scout named Poriapul led Zara to a cheap hotel where his companions were waiting. The two joined up with them and headed to the dining hall, and as soon as they all received drinks and made a toast, Poriapul introduced the group. Everyone grew extremely excited once they heard Zara was an S-rank swordsman.

The labyrinth was called the Elstoran Labyrinth, and it was what was known as a multiplex labyrinth.

A multiplex labyrinth sent all parties of adventurers who passed through its entrance into different phases. Coming across adventurers outside of your own party was an impossibility.

For example, if Party A entered the boss room on the first floor and defeated the boss and Party B entered at precisely that moment, the boss would still be there. In other words, it’s as if the two parties were entering different labyrinths comprised of the same contents.

Once you entered a multiplex labyrinth, you wouldn’t meet anyone other than the people with whom you entered. This was the labyrinth of Zara’s dreams.

Poriapul and his companions were all from another town in Roahl, and they’d formed a party to delve into the labyrinth and take on quests. They had been spending some time gathering information in this town and had a stroke of luck when they found a valuable ancient text. In that text was written a method of conquest that fulfilled certain conditions for the Elstoran Labyrinth.

“It doesn’t seem like you know the Elstoran Labyrinth. It’s famous in this country and is also known as the Ghost Labyrinth. There’s only one floor, and there are eight rooms. Skeletons are the only monsters. There are normal skeletons, red skeletons, and black skeletons. If you defeat the skeletons while fulfilling a certain condition, you are teleported to the boss room. The boss is a ghost, and it offers you

prizes. The prizes are very rare and powerful weapons. No matter how many people are in the party, everyone receives a weapon that suits them. Apparently, if you reject the weapon, you'll have to fight the ghost. But we're not going to do that. The weapons are our goal."

He wet his throat with some ale and continued his explanation.

"The hint for clearing the labyrinth is displayed on the rock by the entrance. There's a long and thin protruding rock, the top of which is cut diagonally. There are twelve jewels inserted into it, and they shine in various colors. Every time someone clears the labyrinth, the gems change color. It's said that they display how you should defeat the skeletons, but no one knows how to read them. In the end, everyone kills the skeletons at random and hopes they get lucky and get transported to the boss room."

He gulped down some more ale.

"I can't say that's a particularly wise method, but once every two or three years, someone ends up being teleported to the boss room. And every time that happens, the color of the gems changes. Problem is, no one understood what those colors were displaying. Until now, that is."

Poriapul pulled the ancient text out of his Bag and showed Zara a certain page.

"As you can see, this part right here is clearly depicting the colors of the twelve gems. The adventurer who drew this cleared the labyrinth when the gems were this color. He wrote down what he did to clear it that time, and..."

Poriapul suddenly leaned toward Zara and continued with a whisper.

"Don't you see? The normal skeletons and the black skeletons have nothing to do with it. You can kill them or ignore them; they're irrelevant either way. The ones that matter are the red skeletons. There's a set number you need to kill in each room. You can't kill any more or any less than that number. Once you've gone through the entire labyrinth and killed the exact right amount, it will satisfy the clear condition. The number of red skeletons we need to kill is written in this ancient text. Also..."

He smirked and struck the ancient document with his finger.

"...these colors are exactly the same as the colors over the entrance right now."

At first, the strategy seemed rather straightforward, but the stipulation of dispatching a set number of enemies made things considerably more difficult. They had tried multiple times, but because the skeletons attacked in groups, it was easy to kill too many by accident. When fighting lots of enemies at once, it is difficult to keep track of exactly how many you have eliminated. For that reason, they had been looking for someone skilled in decision-making to join

their party.

5

This sound is reminiscent of whacking an old tree.

That was what Zara thought after striking down another red skeleton. The group's kill count was now in the dozens.

Zara was using the war hammer Logan had given him as a parting gift. It was very heavy but incredibly forceful, and the red skeletons stood no chance against it. Even the black skeletons were crushed in one blow. One of those black skeletons was approaching him from behind.

Why is no one supporting me? We're acting individually right now instead of as a party.

They had a more-than-ideal party consisting of a scout, a swordsman, a warrior, a support sorceress, an offensive sorcerer, and a healing priest, but they weren't taking advantage of that at all.

The scout was doing nothing other than counting the red skeletons they defeated.

The warrior said he would attract the regular skeletons, but because it took all he had to handle just three of them, that role was too dangerous to leave to him.

The offensive sorcerer was afraid he would kill too many red skeletons, so he didn't participate in the fighting at all.

The sorceress was doing her best to support the party, but she couldn't get near Zara while they were surrounded, so her spells always ended up fizzling out.

The priest would heal Zara when it wasn't necessary, and when Zara did need a healing, the priest was always distracted by something else.

I should just pretend I'm doing this solo. That would be preferable to relying on them.

6

And so they advanced through the labyrinth. They had already killed the designated number of red skeletons in five out of the eight rooms.

Zara had already given up on receiving any offensive help from the other members. At this point, he couldn't imagine killing too many red skeletons and having to go back to the beginning.

Let's just get this over with.

Despite his frustration, he decided to ask the sorceress for something.

“When we go to the next chamber, can you cast restraint magic?”

She said she would do her best, and seeing her smile calmed his nerves.

They entered the room. There were several black skeletons inside, and Zara was proud of himself for having the foresight to ask for restraint magic. The sorceress then cast the spell...

“Earthbind!”

...on Zara.

Zara continued defeating the skeletons while unable to move his legs.

He learned two things in that room. The first was that Earthbind could be cast on party members. The second was that, once cast, the spell could not be removed until time ran out. He hoped to never again be in a situation where this information would prove helpful.

7

They were in the last room. Zara smashed the final red skeleton with his war hammer.

They then heard a low humming sound, and their surroundings became hazy. Before they knew it, they were somewhere else entirely.

The whole party was teleported together. In the middle of the room sat a table upon which weapons had been placed. There was a ghost on the other side smiling silently.

“Yes! We finally did it!”

“We actually did it!”

“Yeah! Our hard work has finally paid off!”

Everyone was celebrating together. Zara didn’t want to be the only one who wasn’t cheering, but he didn’t feel a shred of accomplishment. He couldn’t really feel anything other than relief—he would finally be freed from this nightmarish experience.

He suddenly realized the party had been broken up. They must have been automatically separated when they were teleported to this room. That way, everyone could make the decision individually about whether they wanted to fight the boss.

His comrades ran to the table and reached for the weapons that struck their fancy. Everyone who took one disappeared. They were probably sent back to the entrance of the labyrinth. He had forgotten to ask what happened after you grabbed a weapon.

The party members vanished one after another until Zara was the

only one left, but the young adventurer had no interest in the weaponry. His gaze was locked on the ghost on the opposite side of the table.

8

Can a man be called beautiful?

His silver hair was long and straight. He had a small, oval forehead and kind blue eyes.

He was wearing simple silver cloth made of shining silk, which extended to the ground in many folds. A purple sash was loosely wrapped around his waist, holding the cloth in place. The sash was thin above his left hip and wide below his right, and an elegant knot hung from the right side.

The color of his face and skin was white with a slight hint of yellow. His eyes were a deep blue, and he was smiling. His long, thin, and delicate hands looked like they belonged to a woman.

His body was transparent enough to see the wall behind him, so it felt appropriate to call him a ghost.

"I'm surprised that anyone would summon me after such a long time. But because you have done so, I will do my job. To which labyrinth are you moving?"

"What do you mean by 'which labyrinth'?"

"Hmm? Did you not summon me to adjust a labyrinth?"

"I do not know who you are. I came here after being asked to join a party to help conquer the Elstoran Labyrinth."

"Conquer? What do you mean by conquer?"

"I completed the necessary objective to reach this room."

"Ah, I see. That doesn't really sound like conquering to me. For what reason did you come to conquer this labyrinth?"

"My party members wanted to obtain the weapons offered as prizes."

The silver-haired man's face was blank for a moment, and then he burst into laughter.

"That is delightful. Ah, it all makes sense now. I'm guessing a lot of time has passed. That was a little something I prepared as a reward for whoever made it to this room but lacked the qualifications to summon me. I never intended that to become anyone's primary goal."

"From what I have heard, when one reaches this room, a ghost will appear with some weapons. If you take a weapon, it becomes yours, and if you do not, you fight the ghost."

"I can't fight using *that* thing. The 'me' that usually appears is

nothing more than a projection. Its appearance is the same as mine, but all it can do is tell people that it cannot fulfill their demand because they don't meet the requirements. But *you* do meet the requirements necessary to be a client of mine. That is why I was summoned."

"Can I fight you?"

"Hmm? You want to fight? I am capable of fighting, but I can't be defeated. I have this ghostly body, after all. I am also a simple shadow that does not hold my original consciousness. The fact that I was able to appear, however, does mean that my real body is still alive."

"Where is your real body?"

"Hmm. That is a difficult question to answer. All right, I'll tell you if you swear you won't visit me or tell anyone else where I am."

"Then I won't ask."

"Ha-ha-ha. You're a delightful person. My fighting ability is quite low, so I guarantee you'll be disappointed if we actually dueled... Hmm?"

The ghost's countenance changed as if just noticing something.

"No way, is that...?"

The ghost held his right hand over Zara. The operation screen of Zara's Treasury appeared, and an item search began.

What the hell?! I'm not doing that!

It was definitely impossible to forcefully display the operation screen of another person's Treasury. Yet that was exactly what the ghost was doing.

The display on the screen was changing constantly. Which meant someone other than the owner was actually operating it. Zara couldn't believe what he was seeing. He froze in shock when a certain five items were displayed together.

Those five items were sorted into different categories, stored in different sections, and shared no search parameters, so no search could display them simultaneously on the same screen. Yet the five blessed items bestowed upon House Mercurius were right there on the screen together.

"Where did you obtain these five blessed items? Depending on how you answer, you could become the first human I've killed by my own hand."

9

The ghost's eyes had turned from blue to a brilliant yellow. The kindness in his gaze had vanished, replaced by a look as cold as ice.

Zara took a deep breath and answered.

“These five blessed items have been passed down for generations in House Mercurius of the Baldemost Kingdom. I have been told that the first head of House Mercurius was granted them by the dragon god Kaldan for his bravery and loyalty. The current head of House Mercurius has loaned them to me until I kill the minotaur in the Sazardon Labyrinth.”

For one or two breaths, the ghost stared at Zara, searching him. After that, his expression suddenly softened.

“I can tell from your demeanor that your words are straight from the heart. I apologize for threatening you. Please forgive me.”

The bloodlust vanished from the ghost, and his eyes returned to blue.

Zara became aware that he was sweating. The ghost was quite intimidating for an incorporeal being.

“I am familiar with the Sazardon Labyrinth. But the minotaur? Why would a swordsman of your level have a goal of killing a monster like the minotaur? Those five blessed items would certainly be overkill.”

“A little more than thirty years ago, a minotaur born on the tenth floor of the Sazardon Labyrinth defeated the monsters on every single floor, eventually reaching the bottom and killing the metal dragon some unknown number of times. It took over as the King of the Labyrinth and has been reigning ever since.”

“Huh? A minotaur? Don’t be stupid. Ah, that was rude of me. It’s not that I’m doubting you. But that labyrinth shouldn’t have the kind of unstable makeup that would allow such an irregularity. But of all things, a monster from floor ten. That can’t be a coincidence. Ah, wait a second. There are a number of things I want you to tell me. I also want to apologize. Let’s move to a different location. This isn’t exactly a fitting place for tea.”

The ghost closed his eyes for a while, seeming to think about something.

“What in the world? Everywhere I’m looking has fallen into ruin. What year is it, exactly?”

“It is the year 1116 of the Royal Calendar.”

“Royal Calendar? From what kingdom?”

“The Baldemost Kingdom. The year the goddess Kaldan, um, passed away was used as the first year of the Royal Calendar.”

“...My. This is surprising. An incredible amount of time has passed. Hmm. I wonder if that spot would be okay. Ah, it seems fine. Hold on, we’re moving.”

Their surroundings changed in an instant. They must have teleported, but Zara didn’t experience the uncomfortable feeling associated with teleportation. It usually felt like you were being

dragged in multiple directions or turned inside out.

They were at a gazebo located in a garden full of blooming flowers. There was a marble table and two chairs made out of a material Zara didn't recognize, but they were white and marked with luxurious carvings.

"Go ahead, take a seat. I apologize, but I am unable to make tea. Feel free to drink anything you may have in your storage. I am not capable of eating or drinking, myself. I'm perfectly fine standing, too, for that matter, but I'll sit down."

The ghost sat in the chair. His movement and seated posture were oddly elegant.

"That's right. I became the final boss of that labyrinth. As you're the first official victor in over one thousand and two hundred years, I need to give you a reward. What would you like?"

"Nothing comes to mind."

"No, no, that won't do. You're going to make me lose face as a final boss. Okay. How about this?"

The ghost set a shortsword on the table. The blade seemed stunted even by "shortsword" standards, but it wasn't as small as a dagger. It had a graceful color that suggested it was made of orichalc, but its red-painted tip gave it an ominous edge.

"With a small swing, this will produce a magic circle about six meters in diameter, and with a large swing, it will produce a magic circle about three hundred meters in diameter, which will crush everything it envelops. You can summon the magic circle near or far depending on how you swing the blade, so it's a very convenient weapon. In order to use it, all you have to do is sacrifice the lives of at least ten people every year by your own hand."

"I don't need that kind of cursed item."

"No, there's no curse. As long as you use it properly, that is. It's only when you forget to kill ten people that you will be cursed."

"I don't need it."

"That's too bad. Then how about this?"

Next, he placed a ring embedded with a gem on the table. The dark-red crystal looked high in quality, but something about it seemed odious.

"This is a kind of resurrection ring. It's an inferior version of the Ring of the Underworld. If this is equipped, then even the largest of injuries will heal instantly, and you will be brought back to life immediately after you die. But like the Ring of the Underworld, it does not halt aging, so it grants immortality but not eternal youth. It is also weakened slightly by holy element attacks. Additionally, if you use this, a low-rank demon will become your master and you will have to serve it for all eternity."

“I don’t need it.”

“If it’s the demon you’re worried about, don’t be. It’ll be no problem if you seal it beforehand. If you wish, I can help you with that. Once you seal the demon either within your body or somewhere in your clothes, it becomes quite convenient. When the owner of the ring dies, the seal is broken, and it will slaughter whoever killed you or anyone foolish enough to run off with your belongings.”

“I don’t need it.”

“Hmm. You are quite picky.”

After that, the ghost showed him a mirror that took over the mind of anyone who looked into it and also a helm that reflected any attack one day later with an attack one hundred times as powerful, but Zara didn’t want those, either.

“I really don’t know what to offer you. Just tell me if you see something that you like. All right, there are a number of things I want to talk about. Do you mind if I ask some questions?”

10

The first thing the ghost asked was what countries there were in the world, currently. He then asked about the minotaur in the Sazardon Labyrinth. Zara answered his questions to the best of his ability.

“Wait. What exactly is an adventurer? Huh. I didn’t realize that kind of holy occupation existed.”

“Potions sound really amazing. If you have any now, may I see them? My, that’s a lot. Interesting.”

“The rate of growth within labyrinths is quite high. I see. So that’s what filled the gap left behind by divine spirits. How clever. Given that the population of humans has increased and their countries are prospering, that must have been highly effective. But wouldn’t such a method only lead to stagnation? Ah, never mind that. That’s not a question for you. Hmm. I’ll have to look into that later.”

“Can you show me this ‘adventurer medal’? I find this surprising. It produces a number to represent strength and ability. These things called levels are an incredible innovation. It must represent the divine protection you have from the gods. Hmm. Very good. I’m sure this tempts everyone to fight and raise their levels.”

“So adventurer medals are issued in temples. I see, I see. This becomes your mark. If you delve into a labyrinth without carrying this, your level won’t increase, right? You don’t know? I assume that is the case.”

“What are these ranks? Do you receive anything when your rank

increases? My. That's interesting. Very nice. Though I don't really understand why it increases not just by your level but also through requests from some guild. I wonder if your rank would increase just as easily if you accumulated good deeds without any relation to the guild or what they have labeled as quests. Ah, that's probably the case."

"Does that mean that if you kill people who haven't committed any crimes, your rank will go down? Yeah, yeah. That sounds right. That's good thinking. That way, people will be steered toward not abusing their strength. Without that mechanism, blood would rain from the skies."

After asking a variety of questions, the ghost paused, his facial expression shifted, and he asked one more.

"By the way, from what you've told me, it sounds like no one has seen a dragon in the last thousand years. I mean outside of labyrinths, of course. Am I correct in assuming that?"

Zara fretted for a little while over whether it was okay to answer that question. He then felt a strong inclination to tell his host about what had happened.

"Yes. But just a few days ago a white dragon, the child of the goddess Kaldan and her husband, was born. Through a strange twist of fate, I was there to witness the birth and even received the honor of naming it."

The ghost stood up suddenly. He then pressed his hands against the table and bowed his head.

"This is a very rude thing to ask of you, but can you please show me your memories? I'm begging you."

Zara braced himself and answered.

"Go ahead."

"Thank you."

While giving his thanks, the ghost reached out his right hand and touched Zara's forehead. He then closed his eyes and began to mutter something. Zara was dizzy for a moment.

The next thing he knew, the ghost had already removed his hand from his forehead. The ghost's eyes were still closed, and he appeared lost in thought.

Tears were streaming from his eyes. The tears that dripped down from his chin vanished in midair before they reached the table or the floor.

Zara wasn't sure how long they spent like that.

The ghost then straightened his back, placed his right hand over his heart, and bowed deeply to Zara. His long silver hair hung low.

"Zara, I give you my thanks. You protected my child. I have no words to show my gratitude. You also chose a wonderful name and, most importantly, guided her to the appropriate place. I also won't

forget what you did for Paksalimana and Narillia. I will definitely return the favor someday.”

Zara was taken aback by the ghost’s words but could see he was being sincere, so he did not take the show of gratitude lightly. He stood up and returned the bow.

“I am happy I could be of help, but I had the guidance and the assistance of the gods. I am already receiving excessive favor as is.”

The ghost grinned.

“Yes... That was an answer straight from the heart. I want to speak to you for a little while longer, but as I have somewhere I want to go straight away, let’s say our farewells here. Ah...”

Something had caused the ghost’s figure to begin to fade.

“Shoot. I let myself get too emotional, and my spectral form has become unstable. Hmm. That’s too bad. I wanted to see my daughter at least once.”

His body was quickly becoming more transparent.

“Ah, don’t make such a worried face. My main body appears to be safe, so in time, this spirit form will recover. My main body is unconscious, though, so it will probably take a while. But it’s fine. I’m now looking forward to waking up again. I’ll need to give you a proper reward and return the favor for what you have done. For the time being, you can help yourself to anything on the table. Okay, Zara. Till next we meet.”

After the ghost finished speaking, he disappeared. Now alone, Zara was at a loss for what to do.

Where am I, and how do I get back? And what should I do with all these items that look too dangerous to touch?

Interlude 5

When the minotaur defeated the metal dragon for the hundredth time, a small entrance had appeared opposite the boss room on the outermost hallway of the one hundredth floor. However, the minotaur had never gone near it.

Actually, it did pass by once, when the large mob of humans had attacked. It had approached the opening while raging around the floor, but it never noticed.

Anyone without the proper qualifications was incapable of seeing it.

The minotaur once again left the boss room of the one hundredth floor, killed three more hydras, and walked along the corridors.

It did not have a destination in mind. It just wanted to move its body. It just wanted to struggle.

The minotaur then passed in front of the small entrance.

What is this?

I should have passed this spot many times before.

But if this was here, there is no way I would not have noticed.

Which means it must have appeared after I secluded myself in the metal dragon's room.

Through the entrance was a long corridor that descended slightly as it went.

The minotaur wondered if there was anything at the other end of that long hallway. There could even have been another staircase down, which it had given up on finding.

It stepped through the entrance and entered a hallway it had never seen before.

The passageway extended far into the distance.

The minotaur pressed forward.

It walked and walked, but the corridor never ended.

The staircase down from the ninety-ninth to the one hundredth floor was also incredibly long, but this was much longer.

The hallway was pitch-black, but that was not a problem for the minotaur thanks to its Night Vision skill and various other sensory skills.

It tried expanding the range of its Perception skill but did not detect anything. That meant there were no living creatures nearby.

The minotaur kept walking.

It was unaware of how long it had been walking. It was likely an even longer distance than existed between the first and one hundredth floors of the Sazardon Labyrinth.

As soon as it started to consider the journey fruitless, it saw a dim light ahead.

When it drew closer to the light, it saw there was a small open space at the end of the hallway. It appeared to be a dead end.

It felt slightly disappointed, but when it stepped into the open space, some flat stones arranged in a circle in the center of the room lit up with a blue glow.

Illuminated by the blue light coming from the ground in the otherwise pitch-black room, the minotaur looked like a strange god of legend.

The light must have been telling it to step onto the stones. That is what the minotaur decided, so it did just that.

Then, the minotaur disappeared.

Chapter 16

The Raging Flames

1

It's raining.

I listen closely to the sound.

I hear it splashing against the leaves on the trees in the garden. I hear it falling into the pond. I hear it against the ground. I hear it reverberating off the roof of the distant gazebo.

I let the sounds wash over me. On rainy days like this, I open the lid of the box shut away deep in my heart.

Flames rage within that box. Flames of a deep-seated grudge that will never die.

If I were to release those flames, they would consume me, the people I hold dear, and this entire country, bringing everything to ruin.

That is why, on rainy days like this, I gently open the box. The sound calms the raging flames. I just barely escape being consumed by the desire for revenge sealed within.

Even then, the flames will occasionally flare up and threaten to engulf me in a scarlet rage. A part of me wouldn't mind if that happened. A part of me wishes nothing more than for that to happen.

The flames were lit within me when I was five years old, and at eighty-one, they are still burning strong.

2

I wonder if that boy knows that although he calls me his savior, he is actually mine.

He is the one who saved me. Well, he's not a boy anymore. He is the head of the twenty-fifth noble family of counsel and the first Defender of the Realm in over one thousand years.

He is a rare hero who defeated an invincible monster and won a

divine sword, stamped out a rebellion and decapitated the ringleader, overpowered one hundred knights in the presence of the king, smashed the fearless Northern Knights and won the land of Keza.

But to me, Panzel Goran, the Defender of the Realm, is still a boy. The way I see him has not changed since he first appeared before me in front of the Sazardon Labyrinth.

When I met him, he was holding Alestra's Bracelet, so I thought Lord Percival must have sent him to me. I thought he was telling me this boy would be a worthy person to raise to support Lord Julius. I don't think that was wrong.

But then I met Panzel's mother and learned his father was the grandson of Eisha Goran. I knew then that Panzel must also have been sent to me by Eisha.

3

Eisha was born in the south. It's thought that his birthplace was likely in the northwest of the Gorenza Empire, near the Era Wetlands.

He made a name for himself at a young age in the imperial capital as a swordsman. He excelled in military strategy and had great knowledge of history, and many lords wanted him to enter their service. Instead, he wandered the land without an employer and made a living teaching the sword.

While touring the countries in the south and challenging renowned warriors in each area, he came to be known as an unparalleled swordsman. His admirers grew in number, and many kings and lords invited him to serve them under extraordinary terms. However, he did not enter anyone's service.

His wandering eventually brought him to the Baldemost Kingdom in the north. At that point, his fame was already great even there, and the lords were vigorous in their attempts to invite him into their homes. Where Eisha decided to visit was the estate of my father, Mazel Sou La Vald.

At that time, my father was nothing more than an average knight of the Imperial Guard, but his ability with the sword surpassed that of his peers. Eisha visited my father's sword instructor, and it was through him that he ended up being introduced to and crossing blades with my father.

Their fierce fight became the stuff of legends. Afterward, they drank enough beer to tear holes in their stomachs, and they became great friends.

The broad-minded Eisha and my diligent and honest father hit it off

immediately. They had shared interests in both their love for swords and their love for alcohol. Whenever Eisha was asked why he came north, he would always say it was because he had gotten tired of southern booze.

My father entrusted the education of my older brother and me to Eisha. My brother started official sword training right away, but as I was young, Eisha and I mostly just ran around the hills and fields.

I would run with all my strength, laugh, and eat. I learned about grass, trees, and beasts. I also learned about water, the sky, the earth, the mountains, and the way of the universe.

My father was often away on business, so to me, it felt like Eisha was my real father.

Eisha was by no means my father's vassal. He simply lived at our estate. My father never ordered Eisha to do anything, and Eisha never humbled himself to my father as one would to their employer.

My father must have been giving Eisha some money to live off. I don't know anything about that. Nor do I need to know.

Eisha was my father's friend, and he was family to all of us.

4

It was beyond astounding when my father was selected to be the Royal Inspector. It was a post of great honor and responsibility.

The Royal Inspector is one who works for the king directly. The purview of the position concerns the affairs of government and the administration of justice. The Royal Inspector has the authority to freely scrutinize all governmental activities within the royal palace, press charges for wrongdoing, and submit a detailed report for punishment to their superior. They even carry out a fixed range of punishments by themselves toward local bureaucracies directly under the king's control. Furthermore, regarding matters entrusted to a lord by the king, they are able to perform independent investigations and report rewards and punishments. If the Royal Inspector reports wrongdoing related to one's duty, even a cabinet minister or a prefectural governor can be beheaded, and lords can stand to lose a lot of their rights.

Naturally, government officials use every means imaginable to get on a Royal Inspector's good side. Much preparation is undertaken to ensure the position isn't given to someone who can be won over by bribes or flattery.

But the Royal Inspector is a high appointment. The king himself chooses the person for the job, and at least according to regulations,

no one else can select a candidate unless the king makes a direct inquiry. The Royal Inspector is also one of the only senior positions at court that can be filled by someone who isn't a high-ranking noble. Even then, a regular knight of the Imperial Guard ascending to the post went decidedly against precedent, and I have heard the close aides of the king were not happy with it.

In the Privy Council, all four cabinet ministers—that is the White, Red, Blue, and Black Ministers—even took the time to write a document to the king arguing that his choice was inappropriate.

But the king did not change his mind.

The king at the time was known posthumously by the name Shana Eran, which means Kindhearted King. And as the name would suggest, he hated anything unfair or unjust. The royal palace and politics were unfairness and injustice incarnate, though, and the king's efforts to do the right thing had no impact whatsoever.

The king insisted on this one act of selfishness. He was not going to budge on appointing my father to the position of Royal Inspector.

It feels disrespectful to call that “selfishness.” However, such an assessment would not be wrong, considering he made an arbitrary decision after rejecting the warnings of all his advisers.

After claiming a position that was desperately craved by people from both factions, my father became a villain. He must have used some dirty trick to receive such an impossible promotion. He corrupted political convention by deceiving the king himself.

His accusers had no need to offer evidence of what kind of wrongdoing my father had committed. His promotion to Royal Inspector alone was proof enough of his guilt.

Thus, the road to hell was paved.

5

First, my father required help. If he was to be the Royal Inspector, he needed a large number of vassals of suitable ability, and so he turned to sword instructors and acquaintances from various training halls. There was violent resistance to this.

In the end, though he was able to gather the number of people he needed, none of them had a shred of nobility. It seemed there were many who resonated with my father's ideals, but the nobles who attended sword training halls were second and third sons at best or fringe nobles who couldn't hold office. If a noble was told not to join my father by their parents, eldest brother, or their head of family, there was no way they were going to force the issue. It was hard to

blame them for that.

This made my father's work at the royal palace very difficult.

For starters, people aren't allowed onto the grounds of the royal palace unless they hold a certain rank, which served as an impediment in his attempts to investigate government offices. He could be allowed into an office as an employee of public service, but if any office simply used the social-rank stipulation to bar him entry, there was nothing he could do about it. The only time he could force himself through was once he had established guilt of a crime.

Despite the obstructions, my father tenaciously negotiated with departments he had his eye on to get them to submit documents. He had his subordinates copy, organize, and analyze them. He would then take those documents and try to advance the investigation. However, when he tried to visit those departments again, the documents would always have been altered, moved, or disposed of.

The rare government official to cooperate with my father would become a target for either transfer or dismissal, and some were even executed. Of course, on paper, none of these punishments had anything to do with his investigations.

My father changed his tactics. He led his vassals to Anpoan and performed a surprise raid of an import and export facility entrusted by the royal government. They carried out the inspection with lightning speed.

As he had suspected, he found evidence of goods being sold on the black market, illegal payoffs, and unfair trading, all unhidden. Anpoan was already the kingdom's largest port town, and it had been upgraded to a marquis's domain just a few years back. As a result of my father's investigation, the royal palace dismissed three viscounts in charge of international trade, and Marquis Anpoan was reprimanded and had a portion of his tax collecting rights stripped as punishment.

This incurred the wrath of Kurelumo, the Duke of Riga at the time.

The viscounts were all members of House Riga's branch families. House Anpoan had also long been very loyal to House Riga. The Marquis of Anpoan at the time served Kurelumo very well, and his name was being proposed as a candidate for the cabinet. That would have been a massive gain for the Duke of Riga's faction.

But Father ruined those plans. A demotion to an earl's domain was even being considered for Anpoan, so the Duke of Riga must have felt like years of hard work were amounting to nothing.

That anger was evidence of Kurelumo's conceit.

All land, whether it be a marquis's domain or an earl's domain, belongs to the king. Despite that, there are many nobles who think of their land as their own. Moreover, I wonder how Kurelumo would have explained how the affairs of a town as important to the country

as Anpoan came to be monopolized by people connected to his own house.

There are likely to be aberrations in any political system with a storied history. However, powerful nobles who don't hesitate to abuse those distortions have continued to cast a shadow over the purity of this country.

6

Our nation's system of peerage is very different from that of other countries such as the Gorenza Empire.

For example, House Mercurius is a noble family of counsel, which means that, in terms of court rank, we are equivalent to the highest rank of marquis, but we weren't called a marquis's house at that time because we didn't own any land.

Marquises are nobles who have been granted a marquis's domain by the king.

Earls are nobles who have been granted an earl's domain by the king.

The difference between a marquis's domain and an earl's is decided comprehensively by the size of the land, the wealth, the development of industry, and other issues such as transportation and military affairs.

Viscounts are official nobles who are granted a portion of a marquis's or an earl's land.

The rank of baron originated in an entirely different way. It was a rank created for lords who possessed land already before swearing allegiance to the king; a baron's right to own their land was recognized.

As a result, the domains of barons vary in size and strength. There are even barons who are richer and possess more land than some marquises. It is also not always the case that a baron will have a lower seat at court than a marquis or an earl.

Because of the manner in which barons originated, they are never forcibly relocated by the king. Their peerage is never raised nor lowered. By contrast, marquises and earls can be promoted or demoted, and they can even be forcibly relocated. In reality, relocation never occurs unless there is a big change in the kingdom's land as a result of a war or some other major event, but officially, barons are the only rank safe from such a shake-up.

However, despite their land being granted to them by the king, there are too many nobles who rest on their laurels and live carefree

lives on their wealthy domains, completely ignoring the risk of being relocated or having their rank lowered. That land belongs to the king, but they insist on thinking of it and using it as their own.

The Duke of Riga is one such noble.

House Riga is not actually a duke's house. A dukedom is a noble house that is established when a sibling or a child of a king achieves special accomplishments and is awarded a portion of the king's land. The amount of land is never very much, but it is recognized under royal law that their descendants will inherit it.

Many examples where duke's houses were overproduced in order to remove relatives with a high claim to the throne can be seen in other countries. This often backfires when a prince who inherits much land and wealth builds a strong dukedom and becomes a source of disorder for the country. In this nation, it is difficult for duke's houses to gain much power, so that kind of thing doesn't happen.

The first Duke of Riga was originally the next head of House Onis, which ruled over an expansive land that lies west of the country of Tada and east of the feudal states of Fenks. He managed the affairs of the kingdom in place of the young second king after the founding king's death. But he didn't use the political situation for his personal gain. That righteous attitude gained him deep trust not just within the kingdom but also from surrounding countries.

When his father, the head of House Onis, passed away, the second king begged the heir to continue giving his all to serve Baldemost, so House Onis was broken up and absorbed into the surrounding lands.

The second king thought very highly of these efforts for the kingdom, so he awarded his servant with a pivotal piece of land called Riga and gave him the high-ranking position of duke, which was equal in rank with the royal family. He even recognized his right to have his descendants inherit the land. This is when House Riga was established.

I believe the first Duke of Riga was an excellent man. His achievements certainly deserve praise. But it was a mistake to make him a duke. When he was offered the rank from the second-generation king, he should have shown his thanks and politely turned him down.

But he accepted. And that is what corrupted House Riga.

The position of duke should only be given to members of the royal family. It doesn't make sense for someone granted land from the king not to be made a marquis or an earl. The first Duke of Riga was attracted by the virtue of the founding king and came to serve the country after it was established, so the rank of baron would have been appropriate. Also, I realize the first Duke of Riga's accomplishments were great, but House Riga is not the only noble house that has put the kingdom above their domain and given their all to serve the king.

Despite that, House Riga has flaunted the accomplishments of its first head and reaped the benefits of his great character, becoming a terrible poison to our country.

A certain event played out after I became old enough to remember things. Molzora had inherited the position of the Duke of Riga from Kurelumo.

A dispute flared up between one of the feudal lords of Fenks and an earl of this kingdom. If the earl won the dispute, the kingdom would have gained more land. The cabinet ministers were of the opinion that the royal capital should offer its support.

Molzora, who was the White Minister at the time, rejected that. He said that if the royal capital intervened, then the surrounding lords in Fenks would join the war.

That was well stated. But he had to have been planning something behind the scenes.

He then stopped the provision of salt. It is impossible to fight a war without salt. The earl and his relatives tried to buy it from the royal capital, and they also tried to procure it from salt fields.

The price, however, suddenly skyrocketed in the royal capital, and all the salt in the salt fields had been sold off to the neighboring country of Tada. As a result, despite the fact that the war was going well, the earl had to declare a ceasefire without having gained any land at all.

It is said that the earl rushed to the royal capital still in full armor, tracked down the officer in charge of the buying and selling of salt, drew his longsword, and cut his desk clean in two. The one the earl really wanted to cut down was the Duke of Riga. Everyone understood who was responsible for guiding that war to a losing conclusion.

House Riga has total control over this nation's salt and iron. Their land stretches all the way from the coast to the center of the country. All transports to and from overseas must pass through Riga. In addition, all the seaside towns including Anpoan are either ruled by House Riga or are under their influence.

Their territory also includes every village that produces salt. The most prominent ores in the country are all under the control of House Riga as well.

Like a kraken from the sea, House Riga has been reaching its tentacles deep into every corner of the nation for many, many years.

They gain control over people with sweet talk and blackmail in their efforts to swallow up everything for themselves. Anyone unable to stomach their behavior or who refuses to fall in line is treated horribly. The insidious house will even go to extremes like halting the country's supply of salt when an earl from an opposing faction simply tries to take more land for himself.

7

Kurelumo was very talented and must have had the ability to charm others. However, his brain was afflicted with the chronic disease of House Riga.

Land, wealth, authority, and rank are gifts from the heavens, and anyone who would encroach upon them was a madman who had to be eliminated. Believing that, there was no way Kurelumo was going to leave my father alone.

My father returned to the capital to wrap up the case and submit his report. He then mobilized his vassals and reproduced the contents of Anpoan's investigation without any omissions. On the small chance the documents in the royal palace were to go missing, the facts of the case and the fairness of the investigation would be made evident by those materials.

Afterward, once my father confirmed all the work was finished, he gathered his vassals and held a banquet in recognition of their services. It was the year 1024 of the Royal Calendar, the third day of the Third Red Moon.

That is when the Duke of Riga's soldiers attacked. Through Kurelumo's cunning, he didn't just send soldiers from his own house. He also convinced two cabinet ministers who were antagonistic to House Riga to send their soldiers as well. That way, he was able to disguise the event as a decision of the royal court rather than a personal grudge.

Why those other two houses participated in the tragedy, I still don't understand to this day, but there must have been some reason. Something to make my father's death advantageous to them. Or something that would have made it disadvantageous not to kill him.

Whatever that reason, Kurelumo sniffed it out. At five years old, I had no way of knowing the circumstances of the houses of the cabinet ministers, but I couldn't come up with anything even when looking into it afterward.

On that day, 343 people were slaughtered in my home.

We lived on the outskirts of the royal capital, and there was a mountain behind our estate that was part of our grounds. Twelve thousand soldiers surrounded the property, used magic to burn it to the ground, and killed all who tried to flee.

The next morning, Kurelumo visited the royal palace. He waited for the king to take his seat and reported that he had subjugated the

traitor. That traitor was Mazel Sou La Vald.

His Majesty must have felt a sense of divine retribution.

The Royal Inspector he'd personally selected had discovered a group of government officials performing unfair trade with foreign countries and then skillfully brought them to justice. His investigation and his verdict had been perfect, and there was no way the government employees in the capital could deny his talent any longer. Then, as if things couldn't get any better, the target of the investigation was Kurelumo's favorite underling, which meant that for the time being, he wouldn't have to see that nasty smile as Kurelumo suggested the man for Black Minister.

How satisfied His Majesty must have been.

Had you asked the opinion of anyone who was in court to bear witness to His Majesty at the time, they would have all said he was jubilant. I've been told he was always raising toasts to my father during meals at which my father was not present. He had already heard my father's report on the throne, but he had been planning to invite him to a more intimate recognition of his services and had even prepared a reward for him.

He then had to hear that my father had been charged as a traitor and executed. The Duke of Riga may as well have declared that he had killed His Majesty himself. His Majesty's face turned purple, and he was unable to utter a single word. He withdrew from the throne shortly thereafter.

It was an understandable reaction and heartrendingly sad.

But.

At that moment, His Majesty should have asked a question.

Kurelumo had said that he had killed the traitor and that it was necessary for his family and all his vassals to be executed as punishment for the great crime. His Majesty, however, should have asked whether they were already dead. Kurelumo had not yet clearly stated under what evidence he had convicted my father as a traitor.

I know that, among Kurelumo's charges, he accused my father of having taken in a warrior famous in several countries and of using him to train up an army of soldiers who called themselves the warrior's pupils. This was purportedly done in spite of his position as a single government official. At the time, however, aside from his daughter, Eisha had only taken in three pupils, and he didn't even participate in the training of our vassals. There was no way that should have sufficed as the primary proof of rebellion.

No matter how flimsy the substance of his accusation may have been, though, Kurelumo was not forced to go into detail. He must have been licking his lips like a snake after His Majesty took his leave.

Kurelumo had just reported to the king that there had been a plot

for rebellion, that the ringleader had already been executed, and that his entire family needed to be executed as well. In response, His Majesty had ended the Privy Council without saying a word. This meant Kurelumo's actions had received royal consent.

Kurelumo gave the order to all the cabinet ministers to send out their soldiers, this time under royal command. All the cabinet ministers became accomplices.

All at once, the house where my older sister was living with her husband—as well as the households of my father's siblings, my mother's maiden family, and my mother's siblings—was attacked, and not even infants and retainers were spared. My entire family was wiped out. Seven hundred and twenty-five people died over the course of two days.

His Majesty apparently heard how things had played out the next day. His rage caused his physical condition to deteriorate, and he died without ever again leaving his bed.

My father's investigation was made out to be a fabrication. The records that were in strict safekeeping in the royal palace disappeared, and the documents my father had prepared were burned.

The three viscounts who were dismissed regained their posts, and Marquis Anpoan was named Black Minister.

For a long time after I obtained the list of names of all who were killed, I found the number of people on it strange. The reason for that was that my name was on the list, despite the fact that I am very much alive.

I wondered if the corpse of one of the vassals' children was mistaken for my own. Maybe the 725 count was wrong, and they had simply counted my nonexistent corpse.

But neither of those was the case. Seven hundred and twenty-five people did die. I learned that when I asked Panzel's mother if she knew what had happened during the attack.

That night, there was a battle bloodier than I could have possibly imagined, all for the purpose of saving my life.

8

Panzel's grandfather's name was Charda, and he came from the borderlands to the west. He admired Eisha and became one of his pupils. He was twenty-two years old at the time of the incident.

He was invited by Eisha to the banquet on that day but turned down the offer, saying he was going to look after the house. Charda's two brothers went in his place. Eisha was their instructor, and he had

formerly ordered them to go to Anpoan as escorts.

Before tragedy ensued, Eisha noticed the forces surrounding the mansion and the mountain. He never would have dreamed that in the royal capital, though, the estate of a high-ranking official working directly under the king would be bombarded by magic attacks without warning, so he was late to act. Once the attack began, he understood that if they were willing to go to this extent, they would be prepared to let not one person escape with their life.

I was with Eisha. I don't remember the reason for that, but according to Charda, I was there to deliver a message from my father.

"I tried to raise a toast to the amazing work of your two pupils, but they insist they only follow your orders and cannot have a drink in your absence. Help me out and come to the banquet." That is apparently the message I delivered.

I have a hard time believing I was able to remember something so complicated at five years old, but Charda said I did so perfectly.

My father was a poor knight, but he inherited land on the suburbs of the royal capital from his grandmother. It had a spacious courtyard, or rather, the courtyard was the only thing that was spacious. The main building of the estate was rather compact.

At first, Eisha lived in a small shack neighboring the main building. When my father became Royal Inspector and had to build living quarters for his vassals, the garden became crowded with makeshift shacks. Knowing that Eisha probably wouldn't be able to relax there, my father offered him a secluded cabin a good distance into the mountain.

Apparently, I spent more time in this detached cabin than I did in the main building.

Eisha lived there with his daughter, Enina, and Charda. Enina was fourteen at the time. She was very nice, and I admired her like a real older sister. She obviously had a mother, but I don't know what happened to her. She could have died while traveling, or they could have separated for some reason.

Charda's two brothers stayed in the main building and alternated acting as my father's guard.

Eisha made a quick decision. He picked me up, told Charda and Enina to quietly follow us, and jumped into the bushes without even looking at the burning main building. He kept low and walked until he reached a river. There was a small fishing boat tied to the shore.

He laid me and Enina down in the boat and covered us with a woven mat. He then ordered Charda to take us all to the waterway in the royal capital.

I do remember getting into the boat. But I fell asleep, so I didn't see anything after that.

The enemy knew there was a cabin in the mountain. After the main building was attacked, it would be next on the list. They were probably watching every exit down from the mountain, meaning there was nowhere we could run. Even if we managed to escape down the mountain, we would have ended up in an open plain, so escaping without being seen would have been impossible.

For that reason, Eisha decided we should hide ourselves on the river and escape to the royal capital. The river was connected to the capital's waterway. We could use the dark curtain of night to make it there without being seen. Charda had no idea what to do once we reached our destination, however.

Staying low and taking care not to make a sound, he took up the oars and began moving us forward. When we were just about to reach the royal capital's waterway, enemy patrols advanced on us. Charda brought the boat to a stop in a spot concealed by tall grass, held his breath, and glared at the approaching enemy.

"I highly doubt they got this far," said a man commanding multiple soldiers.

That's Conpachi.

Charda realized who he was. Conpachi was the third son of an influential noble who liked to brag about his swordsmanship. For some reason, he bore a grudge against Eisha and had a habit of proclaiming that weak swordsmen from the south had no chance against heroes from the north. He declared all who followed that old man, who couldn't even become an officer in the south, were fools, and as if trying to expose Eisha's weakness, he challenged him to a duel on three separate occasions. He was beaten to a pulp every time.

You would think Conpachi's attitude toward Eisha would have changed after that, but he continued bad-mouthing him. As one of Eisha's pupils, Charda was constantly being ridiculed and harassed by Conpachi.

And now the man was right there in front of him, carrying a cone-shaped magic lamp in his left hand and a lance in his right. He was approaching the bank of the river.

I could kill him right now.

Charda contemplated killing him as he sat in the boat. Conpachi was as skilled as Charda, but with Eisha, the two of them could cut him and any other number of soldiers down in no time.

But there were hundreds of soldiers just dozens of meters away. Past them was an even larger force. It would have been impossible to kill Conpachi and the soldiers around him before they raised an alarm.

The only chance they had for survival was to not be found. If they were discovered, Charda would have no choice but to fight to the death against an overwhelming number of soldiers.

Conpachi spun around to check his entire field of vision and used his magic lantern to illuminate the river. He pushed his way through the grass with his spear and caught sight of the spot where Charda was lurking. Their eyes met.

Conpachi averted his eyes instantly and told his subordinates there was nothing there.

“Sure enough, there’s no one here. Let’s look upstream.”

The soldiers raised their voices in response, and the group walked away toward the mountain.

Feeling shocked enough to have a heart attack, Charda got out of the boat. His body had gone numb, and he was unable to move for a while. He felt a huge wave of relief.

But that was really strange. Charda tried to convince himself that Conpachi probably just didn’t see anything because his vision was obstructed by the afterimage of the burning building, but their eyes had definitely met.

He asked his instructor about it when we made it to the royal capital.

“Hmm” was Eisha’s only response.

9

Eisha told Charda where to take the boat, and then we all got out and immediately headed for our destination.

Eisha carried me as we ran, and on the way, Charda picked up Enina as well. We reached a large estate, and Eisha unsheathed the sword at his hip and handed it to the person who came to the door. It was an excellent sword in spite of its simple make, and Eisha had used it for a long time.

Astonishingly, despite our suspicious nature and our sudden arrival late at night, the servant let us into the house, no questions asked. We hadn’t even given our names. Water and tea were quickly prepared for us, so everyone except for me—as I was still asleep—was able to quench their thirst.

Then, in a surprisingly short amount of time, the person who had greeted us at the door returned, said we were going to meet the head of the house, and guided the four of us to a different room. This time, Enina carried me.

“I am the head of this family, Baldoran Mercurius. First, let me return this sword to you. Welcome to my home.”

Charda didn’t realize whose house it was until then. This noble was a descendant of that hero.

“I am a swordsman named Eisha Goran. My apologies for visiting so suddenly at this late hour. I come with the request that you take in the boy my daughter is holding in her hands. He is the second son of Mazel Sou La Vald.”

“Has something happened to the Royal Inspector?”

“His estate is being set ablaze at this very moment by an unfathomable number of soldiers.”

“...What?”

The head of the house seemed to be a good-natured man, but after hearing that, his expression suddenly shifted. He gave off an aura that would have driven away even the fiercest of gods, which made it clear that this house had not lost its warrior spirit.

He calmed down a short moment later, then spoke again.

“I never had the pleasure of meeting him, but I have known of him for some time. I was praying for his success.”

“Can I leave the boy in your custody?”

The head of the house looked Eisha square in the eyes and answered with a question.

“If I take him in, what are you going to do?”

“I will do what I must.”

The head of the house closed his eyes, looked up at the sky, and sighed.

“I see. That’s the way it has to be. Things can’t be left as they are. Your name, face, and character are well-known. Can I get a good look at the Royal Inspector’s son?”

After receiving a nod from Eisha, Enina stepped forward with me still in her arms.

“Ah, he’s sleeping soundly. Mr. Goran, can you tell me his name and age?”

“His name is Adol. He is five years old.”

“Five years old. Hmm. Five years old.”

The head of the house stared at my face in contemplation and eventually called a maid and gave her an order.

“Mr. Goran. You can entrust his second son to me. He and your daughter can share a room.”

“You have my humblest thanks. Enina, take him with you to the room.”

Enina and I were then led deeper into the house by the maid.

“By the way, Mr. Goran. Would you happen to have a dagger?”

Eisha handed his dagger to the head of the house, who said he was borrowing it temporarily and then set it on a nearby desk. He proceeded to remove a leather string from the scabbard he was wearing at his waist and fastened it around his wrist and pinky finger on his left hand.

His face hardened.

The maid came back with a single boy. I've been told he had my hair color and was around the same age as me.

Charda felt a sense of unease when he saw the boy. The reason for that was he was wearing my clothes.

The maid quickly left the room.

"This is my son, but due to extenuating circumstances, he bears the family name of my wife. Come, Pan'ja."

Rubbing his sleepy eyes, the boy walked forward. The head of the house hugged his son tight, then took the dagger and plunged it into his heart.

He laid the boy's body on the floor. He then drew the longsword at his waist, stood the blade on the desk, placed the pinky finger of his left hand below it, and cut it off in a single motion.

He stopped the bleeding by tying the leather string tightly around what was left of his little finger. He then wrapped the finger in a cloth he produced from his sleeve and laid it on his son's chest.

"Forgive me, Pan'ja," he muttered softly, and stood up and addressed Eisha.

"Mr. Goran. This will not end until they find the corpse of his second son. They'll leave no stone unturned, and they'll tear the faces off every burned corpse if they have to. They will not stop until they have confirmed his death."

Eisha took the boy's small, lifeless hands in his and wept. He cried with all his might, to the point that it sounded like his throat would be left shredded. The tears streaming from his eyes collected in his goatee, and his wails swept through the room, cutting deep into all who heard them.

Before long, the tears falling onto the boy's chest ran red. Eisha was crying tears of blood.

"Bear witness, O Zara, to the integrity of the warriors of the north!"

Eisha implored his god with words typical of a warrior, stood up quickly, and then turned to Charda.

"Stay here for the night. Sorry to ask this of you, but please look after Enina. Use the money I gave you however you please."

He then turned to the head of the house again.

"I will never forget your kindness," he said in brief thanks.

"I'm glad we met," the head of the house responded, also briefly.

The two of them bowed to each other.

Eisha picked up the corpse of the child and left the room. That was the last time Charda saw him.

The next day, Charda collected Enina and left the estate. The head of the house was nice enough to let them hide in a shopping wagon. They escaped together to the borderlands in the west and were

married sometime later.

Eight years after they left the royal capital, they had a son. Charda taught him how to use a sword.

After Charda died, his son Welzea went to the royal capital and opened a sword training hall. There were people who put him down as a country hick, but he was a very strong man and built a reputation for himself by correcting the behavior of even the worst thugs. He ended up very successful.

Welzea married, and he and his wife had a child: Panzel. Welzea fell ill and ended up bedridden, however, and they instantly fell into poverty. They were swindled out of ownership of the training hall.

Before he died, Welzea told his wife the story behind the incident that his father, Charda, had related to him.

The story that Panzel's mother told me ends there. When she finished, she asked me a question.

"What happened to Eisha Goran?"

I had previously looked into this. This is what is written in records left in the royal palace.

After the rebels and family members were killed in the main building and the surrounding area, the search continued for the second son and the bodyguard, who were said to be living in a cabin separated from the estate.

They were having trouble finding them, so they decided to set the mountain on fire, surround it from a distance, and wait for anyone to come running out. The rebels didn't show themselves even then, but as dawn approached, the swordsman was discovered carrying the second son over his back. He was on the very edge of the encirclement and had been about to slip free, but the talented soldiers' strenuous search ended up bearing fruit.

The swordsman struggled hard like some kind of demon. More than eighty lives were sacrificed in the endeavor to capture him, but his ability to fight was limited thanks to increased efforts with long-distance magic. The swordsman gave up his resistance, killing the second son by stabbing him through the heart and committing suicide by slashing his own throat.

After the corpses were inspected, it was confirmed that the swordsman was Eisha Goran, and from his apparent age and clothes, it was confirmed that the boy was without a doubt the second son of the traitor.

After hearing that, Panzel's mother cried silently.

I raised Panzel with great care. I assigned him the best teachers I could find with regard to both the military and the literary arts. There were many people who looked at me doubtfully, wondering why I was giving a young servant boy this kind of treatment, but I didn't pay them any mind.

Panzel showed astonishing growth. His improvement with the sword was especially tremendous, as if he had been possessed by the spirit of Eisha Goran.

Serendipitously, Lord Julius also grew, as if being guided by Panzel. He was an especially fast learner and showed remarkable skill when it came to the domain of literature.

After Panzel became a knight, he started leading the soldiers of House Mercurius and accomplished one military feat after another.

The Duke of Riga set a trap for Panzel: He would be named the Defender of the Realm if he could manage to defeat the monster in the labyrinth. The king wanted to promote Panzel to a high rank, so he consented to it.

At that time, I had given up my seat as chief vassal and was bedridden in my retirement. As soon as I heard that news, though, I knew it was a trap set by Alkan. I strengthened our surveillance of House Riga.

I then learned that Alkan's eldest son, Garrest, was secretly moving his military forces toward the capital. It looked like they were actually planning a rebellion.

I did a lot of thinking, sifted through the various fragmentary pieces of information our spies had collected for us, and arrived at Alkan's aim.

House Mercurius. He was aiming for House Mercurius.

He got rid of the cornerstone of House Mercurius's military strength by sending Panzel to the labyrinth, and he planned to attack us in his absence. Alkan had also added a strict condition that would make it impossible for Panzel to defeat the minotaur or return. His plan was to then gather his forces and surround the imperial palace, forcing the king to abdicate and transfer the crown to the second prince. He was counting on the king's heart breaking after hearing about the fall of House Mercurius.

I wonder what kind of face I was making at that time. I was probably grinning from ear to ear as I sat in bed receiving reports of the developing situation, feeling my chance for revenge was nigh.

Alkan made a couple crucial errors. The first was that he thought I couldn't get out of bed. The other was assuming Panzel wouldn't make it back. When those two assumptions backfired, that would be the downfall of Riga.

Until then, I had not seen a means of bringing down House Riga,

with all its power and influence. I hadn't been able to create a just cause for which House Mercurius could fight House Riga. But now, they were crossing that line for me.

They could go ahead and cross it. If they took that one step, the raging flames in my heart were going to burn them to ashes. I wouldn't have minded burning down the royal capital if it meant getting rid of House Riga once and for all.

When Panzel headed to the one hundredth floor of the Sazardon Labyrinth, the Duke of Riga's army fell on House Mercurius. They attacked our estate in the royal capital in the middle of the harvest festival. See this reckless act of violence? They all always say they do everything for the country and for the people, but that is just lip service. Nothing could be further from the truth.

I gleefully got out of bed and took command of Mercurius.

Lord Julius was calm. Like me, he did not have a shred of doubt that Panzel would win and return.

But we made a miscalculation. The Baron of Paulo had joined his forces with House Riga.

Our armies clashed three times, and as we were preparing for another battle, Panzel returned.

He said Lord Evert, who had served as the observer, stabbed him with a poisoned dagger. He knew no one would be coming to get him, so he had to return from the one hundredth floor of the labyrinth on his own.

When I heard that, I was horrified by my own stupidity.

Of course that had been a possibility.

There was no reason to doubt Lord Evert's virtue. However, that virtue was probably what led him to believe that tipping the balance in favor of Alkan's plan was for the benefit of the country. That sounds probable, but it wasn't something I had considered at all.

Due to it being in the middle of the harvest festival, there was also no chance of Panzel meeting with other adventurers in the labyrinth. It was a death trap.

I almost ruined House Mercurius. Lord Baldoran killed his son Pan'ja Raban by his own hands, gave me his son's name and position, and loved me as if I were his own. In order to repay my debt to him, I trained myself to the best of my ability and served five heads of House Mercurius. And yet, I almost brought the house to ruin.

Where?

Where did I go wrong?

As I was questioning myself, Panzel finished his report, borrowed Alestra's Bracelet from Lord Julius, and charged alone into the enemy army. When he returned shortly afterward, he presented Lord Julius with a head.

“This is the head of the enemy general, Garrest.”

Garrest!

The voices of Panzel and Lord Julius ceased to reach me. I staggered toward the head, lifted it up to eye level, and stared at it.

There was no doubt it was Garrest, the eldest son of the current Duke of Riga. He was to be the next head of House Riga and had been promised the seat of the Baldemost Kingdom’s White Minister.

Yes!

Yes!

Yesssss!

I’m pretty sure I cried. I never thought I would reach this point, but now it was in my grasp. I was holding the head my sworn enemy would have wanted to lose the least. The head that bore my sworn enemy’s future. Actually, that head itself was my sworn enemy.

At that moment, the dark-red clump in my chest dissolved, and purity returned to my heart. I thought about what I should do next and quickly reached a conclusion.

“Lord Julius. This is without a doubt Garrest’s head. I ask that you give me permission to say what arrangements must be made now.”

“Go ahead.”

“We must have Panzel immediately take one hundred knights and lead them to the royal palace. I will take care of the defense here.”

“Do it.”

“Ha-ha. Panzel, I’m sure you’re tired. Sorry about this. Please head for the royal palace right away and find the commander of either the First or Third Division of the Imperial Guard. Then say that House Mercurius was attacked by rebels, and you rushed to the royal palace to see if anything had happened. Say that you will enter their command. Understood? On the chance the royal palace is already surrounded by the insurgents or that the battle has already begun, do not engage them until you find one of the commanders. Then deliver a message to the Grand Chamberlain from the head of House Mercurius, saying that he wants to ensure the safety of the first prince. Say that he will send more soldiers if needed. Because teleportation magic is restricted around the palace, use a horse and take one hundred soldiers made up of only cavalry. We have one hundred additional soldiers to send, so use them at your discretion. Move out.”

But there was no more fighting after that. When Panzel took Garrest’s head, what the world calls the Pantram Revolt came to an end.

Alkan's performance after Garrest's death would have astonished even the most wicked of demons.

First, he claimed his troops that were going to attack the royal palace had actually arrived to defend it. When the Baron of Paulo saw that, he withdrew to his domain as quickly as he could.

Then Alkan convened the Privy Council and insisted that the Baron of Paulo was the ringleader of the rebellion. He said Garrest's crime of participating in the revolt at the behest of the Baron of Paulo, despite his position as an officer of the Royal Capital Defense Force, was an unforgivable crime, and he presented the heads of Garrest's children and his closest aides on the spot.

Alkan's questioning brought nothing to the surface except for his destruction of evidence by killing all involved. The investigation was blunted by his ghastly willingness to execute the family members and vassals he had always strived to protect.

Alkan then said it would not be appropriate for him to be in charge with his son being the target of the investigation, so the Red Minister, the next highest position in the Privy Council, took over the current proceedings.

Lord Julius's and Garrest's top knights gave testimony on the events of the battle. It was made clear that Garrest was an active participant and not a spectator. Startlingly, though, despite the use of magic to detect lies, when they were cross-examined, Garrest's top knights said nothing about a plan to attack the royal palace after toppling House Mercurius.

After that, Panzel reported what happened during his subjugation of the minotaur. He said the privy councilor Evert of House Lowell stabbed him with a poisoned dagger and that, before he died, he'd said House Riga was plotting to kill the head of House Mercurius, have the first prince commit suicide, and force the king to abdicate. This was an obvious problem.

Alkan, however, insisted that for the last few months he had only seen Lord Evert at official gatherings, that harming Panzel was Lord Evert's own decision, and that getting the first prince to commit suicide or anything else was nothing more than his own speculation.

The next thing he said turned the tide completely.

"How about we call an appraiser to take a look at the longsword that Panzel acquired?"

After they called an appraiser and had him inspect the blade, they discovered it had blessings worthy of it being called a divine weapon. Everyone's attention was drawn entirely toward the sword.

Panzel then fought members of the Imperial Guard, and the king and his subjects were captivated by the blade's powerful blessings and Panzel's superhuman talent.

“This man is worthy of the title of Defender of the Realm!”

Hearing Alkan shout that made my blood boil.

To take responsibility for the failure of his son, Alkan announced his resignation. He did three major things before his retirement.

The first was naming the first prince the crown prince. The second prince was then given the title of duke and a poor village as a domain, falling to the status of a subject. The second queen consort was dethroned.

The next thing he did was invest the title of Defender of the Realm upon Panzel. Panzel was given the right to establish a new noble family of counsel, and he chose Goran as the name of his house. I was worried people would point out that it was the same name as a well-known swordsman in the past, but it seemed like that name had been forgotten.

The last thing he did was organize a force to subjugate the rebel Baron of Paulo. The Baron of Paulo had rejected his summons and refused to explain himself to imperial envoys, so it was decided a subjugation force was necessary. Alkan demonstrated his generosity by having House Riga bear the burden of the army provisions.

Inquiring about the guilt of House Riga became quite difficult after Alkan went to such extremes. Many even began to think Garrest may actually have acted independently.

Reading the shifting mood with cunning, Alkan recommended his successor to the cabinet. When one of the White, Red, Blue, or Black Ministers retires, it is customary for them to name a successor to join the cabinet. His recommendation was for Draydol, the second son of House Riga, to be named Blue Minister.

The brazenness of Alkan naming a successor after taking responsibility for such a major failure raised a lot of eyebrows. He even had the audacity to name his own son. No one thought he would be able to gain the consent of the king, but the king ended up granting it easily. The reason for that was because Alkan paired his son's appointment with a proposal of marriage for Panzel.

House Riga declared it was offering Lady Esseluleia's hand in marriage to Panzel.

Lady Esseluleia was the daughter of Alkan's second wife and Draydol's blood sister. Alkan doted on her, and she was known for her abundant beauty and wit. It was well-known that he didn't want to marry her to another house. The fact that he was willing to give the apple of his eye to the man who killed his son made it look like House Riga was bending the knee to House Mercurius.

The next year, in 1097, Lady Esseluleia and Panzel married. His Majesty the King had a great love for Panzel's valor and was made very happy when he married a girl known in society for her elegance.

For the dowry, Alkan sent Panzel fifty knights. That was a larger dowry than is given at the weddings of princesses. He really is a monster.

Draydol rose from Blue Minister to Red Minister.

At the end of that year, the Black Minister died and Draydol showed himself to be quite the schemer. He recommended Lord Julius to fill the seat. Lord Julius was still only the young age of twenty-three, but because he had earned many achievements as a member of a military family, the recommendation itself was not unnatural.

However, House Riga of all houses making that recommendation surprised everyone and definitely changed the way people saw Draydol. Draydol even went out of his way to give hyperbolic praise to the work of Lord Julius and Panzel during their conquest of the Baron of Paulo's domain. It was very transparent flattery, but many viewed it as a show of magnanimity.

Then, once the subjugation of the Baron of Paulo's domain was complete, Draydol declared to the Privy Council that the land should be awarded to House Mercurius.

I was shocked when I heard this. Had Draydol gone mad?

He even volunteered himself as matchmaker for Lord Julius, this time offering not a relative of House Riga but instead a young lady from a noble family with a long history in the kingdom.

I was speechless.

If he was just trying to win over House Mercurius with marriage, he surely would have chosen a lady from his own house. But whoever he chose from House Riga would have been inferior in rank and beauty to Esseluleia, and it might have caused unease among other houses if Mercurius and Riga were joined directly in marriage.

Against all expectations, the young lady Draydol ended up choosing was from a family that actually hated House Riga and had always been friendly to House Mercurius.

They were even wealthy and had many retainers knowledgeable in domestic affairs. You could not have asked for a better union for a head of house who had suddenly been granted a sizable domain. I couldn't help being impressed by Draydol's judgment.

Lord Julius married and became Marquis of Keza the next year, which is the current year, and Draydol ascended to White Minister at the young age of thirty-six.

heart that it would have before. My grudge will never die out, but as long as Panzel is around, nothing bad will happen. By thinking in this manner, I am able to prevent the flames of my grudge from growing any larger.

That's right—it was *then* that my heart was saved. The moment I held Garrest's head in my own hands. These flames will go out when I die. No one else will inherit them.

Hate warps everything. My hatred has caused me to make many errors of viewpoint and judgment. I believe that being careful not to pass these flames on to anyone else is my final responsibility.

Unneeded memories should disappear with time. Just like the legend of Alestra's Bracelet. It's not a story that proves the pledge of master and servant between the royal family and House Mercurius or anything pleasant like that. It's a story of greed.

The goddess Kaldan was the first the founding king had turned to for divine protection. Receiving her blessing would have enabled him to create a new country in the yet-undeveloped region of the continent's north. Kaldan, however, had been repeatedly abused by human agenda, so she rejected his wish.

The founding king then ordered his subordinates—who would later come to be called the twenty-four Defenders of the Realm—to find and kill Kaldan. The only one who followed the order was the first Mercurius. When he actually met Kaldan, though, he was awestruck by her nobility.

Mercurius proposed the founding king find another land, but the king and his companions were against that. They had finally found this place after being constantly driven out of others around the continent, so they did not want to leave it.

Mercurius then returned to Kaldan alone, planning to die, but Kaldan had grown weary of fighting and chose death without any resistance. When she was on the verge of passing from this world, she gave Mercurius five treasures.

When Mercurius returned, the king went mad with joy over the incredible blessings of the treasures. He thought that Alestra's Bracelet, which had the ability to resist all kinds of magic, was a fitting item for the founding king of this new nation. He then tried to sweet-talk Mercurius into giving it to him. I don't doubt the founding king was a great man without peer, but he had a bad habit of coveting other people's possessions.

But believing that would go against Kaldan's wishes, Mercurius did not hand it to the king.

The king's companions were deeply impressed that Mercurius had defeated the dragon god Kaldan on his own, so they offered the opinion that it would be fitting for him to keep it. It soon became

clear that its effects only worked for Mercurius anyway, so there turned out to be no point in giving it to the king.

So what happened after that?

Every time a new head of House Mercurius took over, the royal family would summon them to check whether the king had become capable of using the bracelet or if House Mercurius had lost the qualification to use it. All in order to steal it from us someday.

They couldn't exactly declare publicly that it was a gift from the wicked dragon Kaldan, so they began claiming the bracelet had been bestowed by the goddess Pharah. The story became that the founding king had granted it to the first head of House Mercurius, and that tale ended up being passed down as a valiant myth about the founding of the kingdom.

The four other treasures—including Kaldan's Dagger—all bore names of wicked dragon gods from the past, so they weren't talked about and eventually faded from memory for all but our house.

It's finally time. Time for our family, too, to forget the secret.

I only taught Lord Julius that the five treasures are gifts from Kaldan and about the effects of the blessings. There is no doubt that the royal family has also forgotten the old legend. The knowledge of the burning greed surrounding the bracelet will die with me.

When people learned of the abilities of the divine sword with which Panzel had returned, I couldn't help but have apprehensions that history would repeat itself, that it would be lusted after like the bracelet was.

After the Pantram Revolt ended, Panzel told the king everything that had happened on the one hundredth floor of the Sazardon Labyrinth. But because he couldn't say publicly that Lord Percival died in the labyrinth, he omitted the part about Kaldan's Dagger.

An appraiser was summoned, and the abilities of the longsword obtained from the monster were made clear. The blessings were so transcendent they seemed like something out of a myth. That Panzel forced the monster to give it to him was seen as proof of his victory.

One lord raised the opinion that it should be given to the king. Panzel then presented it to the king without hesitation. His Majesty the King took one look at it and handed it back to him, saying that Panzel had earned it, so he should be the one to use it.

I think that was splendid of the king. Even with what he did next, I will always consider him a wise ruler.

His Majesty the King continued and said he wanted to see Panzel fight with that sword, so a battle was set up between Panzel and one hundred knights of the Imperial Guard, which he won. Panzel then engaged in a match against the commander of the Imperial Guard's First Division. In this contest, the commander would be the one to use

the sword. However, the blessings did not activate for the commander, and Panzel defeated him as well.

Many other people tried using the divine sword, but it became clear that only Panzel could access its power.

“This is clearly a divine sword given to you by the gods,” said His Majesty.

On the same day as the exhibition matches at the royal palace, Panzel invited the one hundred knights he’d fought to House Mercurius. Despite how busy we were with the aftermath of the Pantram Revolt, Panzel shamelessly asked the chief vassal and me to serve his guests food and alcohol.

Panzel drank with the one hundred knights and made many friends. He has the strange ability to befriend people with whom he has crossed blades.

Panzel can’t possibly understand how much comfort he has brought to my heart.

13

It’s raining.

I notice that the sound of the rain has become quite distant and then see the shutters have been closed and the curtain drawn. I smell the oil of a lamp. It seems night has fallen.

Logan must have come today. Actually, he comes every day, so that should be expected. But I can’t quite seem to remember.

I have a strange relationship with that man. I probably would never have found Alestra’s Bracelet without his help.

A little while after the bracelet was found, Lord Julius asked me if the guild president knew a lot about his father. When I told him that was likely, Lord Julius said he wanted to talk to him. That was a reasonable request, so I explained the situation to Logan and invited him to dinner with the head of the house.

Logan’s stories were interesting. He had many more direct dealings with Lord Percival than I expected and a great number of anecdotes to share about him. He even did research to learn things he didn’t know and shared his findings with us.

I can’t say the way he speaks is elegant, but he showed real expertise. I was thankful for his unbiased viewpoint. Most importantly, his love for Lord Percival was very apparent.

The invitations to dinner didn’t stop after the first or second visit, and we ended up inviting him once every six or seven days. Lord Julius wanted Logan to come even more often, but he was a busy

man.

Eventually, Logan came to talk to Lord Julius about not only Lord Percival but a variety of different topics.

He told him about the life of adventurers and their way of thinking, about fighting monsters, about experience points and items, about foreign countries and their scenery, and about divine spirits and heroes from faraway lands.

He possesses much knowledge that even I lack, so our conversations were fun. I had a hard time believing everything he said was true, however. The tall tales he told of his youth with Gil Linx were stories I would have paid money to hear.

He is also very skilled with a war hammer.

Why did I end up fighting him again?

That's right. After I heard his main weapon was a war hammer, I explained the characteristics of the weapon to Lord Julius.

"It's not a weapon that requires skill, but it's extremely powerful and cannot be managed unless the user has tremendous strength."

I was praising him, but Logan misunderstood me and fired back angrily.

"What was that? 'Not a weapon that requires skill,' huh? How about I give you a taste of my skill?"

I took up a longsword and fought him. After he broke three of my swords and two of my ribs, I surrendered. The next time, of course, I prepared a proper weapon and scored a slash across his chest.

I hadn't had a good dueling partner in a while, so I was probably lonely. He proved to be an unfair matchup for me, though. I've gotten old and now can't even get out of bed.

No matter how much time passes, however, he looks just as healthy as a man in his twenties or thirties. When I asked him his age, I was shocked by the answer and asked why he wasn't slowing down like a normal person.

"My old man was a dwarf, so I'm not totally human," Logan answered.

I took that as a joke at first, but now I think he may actually have been telling the truth. I'm sure there would be a big commotion if it came out that creatures such as dwarves still exist somewhere in the world. But now that he said it, being half-dwarf would explain his unnatural build and stamina.

When he quit his job as the president of the guild, I recommended he move to the estate. I thought he had taken a liking to this place.

"I think I'll take you up on that offer," he answered, and he has lived here ever since.

Have seventeen years really passed since then?

Did Panzel come today or yesterday? Or was that earlier?

He came with happy tidings. He said his child was born. It's a boy. It sounds like he is getting on very well with his wife, too. I was worried because I had heard Lady Esseluleia could be a little too smart for her own good, but it seems that fear was unfounded.

Lord Julius and his wife are also as happy as can be. Their child is going to be born very soon. It will be the same age as Panzel's son, which is delightful. The friendship between House Mercurius and House Goran will surely continue for hundreds of years.

Now that I think about it, the bond between the two families was probably formed by Lord Baldoran and Eisha on that tragic night.

I was quite surprised when I was told to name the child, but I thought that was very like Panzel. I'd had a name in mind that I thought would be wonderful, so I decided to go with it. The naming ceremony was heavily simplified due to my bedridden state, but Panzel and his wife seemed satisfied.

After hearing the name Arza, Panzel gave nothing more than a simple thank you. He didn't ask even one question about the origin of the name. Once again, that was very like him.

Esseluleia thanked me for giving him the name of a hero and left the room.

That is right. Arza was a hero said to have been an attendant who protected the goddess Pharah from all of her enemies. He was a human and also a god. It is also said that Arza pioneered the sword technique of humans.

But Arza had one other role. He was known as the arbitrator of the gods, and he would bring the disputes of fighting gods to an end after listening to what both sides had to say.

Eisha taught me an old myth when I was very young.

A long time ago, humans fought over the gods.

People who wanted the blessings of the land contended over Bora, people who wanted the blessings of the mountains contended over Gahra, and the people who wanted the blessings of the sea contended over Elvetta, all wanting to make each respective god their own.

The humans hated the gods for giving their blessings to others instead of them. Eventually, the selfish desires of the humans caused discord among the gods, which led to infighting.

The strife between the gods broke Zara's heart, as did the strife between the humans. So Zara became wind, invisible to the naked eye, soared up to the heavens, and decided to watch over the fate of gods and humans from on high.

One day, a hero named Arza appeared on the earth and calmed the conflict between the gods. He then also soothed the conflict between the humans. Arza was none other than an incarnation of Zara, who had assumed the form of a human and brought peace to the land.

Drawing on the myth taught to me by Eisha, I wished for good fortune in the life of Panzel's son.

Oh, Eisha...

Did I...?

Did I live a life worthy of your sacrifice?

Eisha!

15

In the year 1100 of the Royal Calendar, first day of the Third White Moon, the former chief vassal of House Mercurius, Pan'ja Raban, passed away. His funeral was the first in the new Keza domain held for an honored retainer.

Marquis Julius Mercurius of Keza served as the chief mourner, and Panzel Goran, the Defender of the Realm, was in charge of the affair. It was a modest funeral, but it was also a noble ceremony that touched the hearts of all who attended.

One thing worthy of mention is that an imperial envoy was dispatched. Pan'ja Raban was not a direct descendant of the house, so no one would have expected the royal family to send a messenger. Some people said the reason for the special treatment may have been because he was a father figure for two young heroes.

Strangely, the envoy did not read the funeral speech that he brought with him. He just gave his condolences in silence and laid it in the coffin. No one knows what it said.

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